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The orchestrated crowd: Choreography, chorus, conceit in Tino Sehgal's *These Associations*

Keywords

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Abstract

In 2012 artist Tino Sehgal created These Associations, *the last in the Unilever series of commissions for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, London. Within this space Sehgal transformed and challenged the role of the public and 'participants' or interpreters in the creation of a relational art piece which represents '[…] a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy' (Bishop 2004: 54). In common with earlier works by Sehgal, and with the 'social turn' of relational aesthetics,* These associations *(2012), is centrally concerned with alternative modes of production. And as has been extensively noted elsewhere (Umathum 2009, Pape, Solomon and Thain, 2014, Green 2017) Sehgal is uninterested in adding to the ever-increasing mass of objects in the world. Instead he asks; how do we think of production in our times? How (and what) can we produce without producing objects?*

The artist Tino Sehgal is the self-proclaimed 'bastard child' of the two practices of art and dance.[1] Like dance, his work invests in the performance of actions rather than the construction of art objects. But unlike dance (or drama), there is no script or notation to document the work for future re-making. Instead, his strategy for perpetuating his now considerable body of work relies on memory and oral dissemination. This does not entirely depend on Sehgal as the sole repository, but there are key individuals trained and entrusted by Sehgal to recall, install and pass on his work to the next generation, so the work can be remade without reference to a written or visual record. This means that when a gallery buys his work (in a process that involves a verbal contract witnessed by an actuary), they buy access to one or more of these designated individuals, who will come to the gallery to construct the work, sometimes with, sometimes without Sehgal (Gleadell 2013). Other than his early work, *Instead of allowing something to Rise Up to Your Face, Dancing Bruce and Dan and Other Things* (2000) in which Sehgal himself choreographed and danced a piece constructed from film footage of works by Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman, Sehgal, like Santiago Sierra, employs and pays others to enact his artworks. Works that are predominantly a combination of choreography and conversation.

In 2012 he created *These Associations*, the last in the Unilever series of commissions for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, London.[2] This enormous civic space, acted as a liminal zone for this piece. That is, the space of the Hall effectively blurred the boundaries between a public realm characterized by free movement and free entry, with the Tate Modern's main gallery spaces and the traditional decorum associated with the museum. It was within this space that Sehgal transformed and challenged the role of the public and 'participants' or interpreters in the creation of a relational art piece that represents '[…] a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy' (Bishop 2004: 54). In common with earlier works by Sehgal, and with the 'social turn' of relational aesthetics, *These Associations* (2012), is centrally concerned with alternative modes of production. And as has been extensively noted elsewhere (Umathum 2009; Pape et al. 2014; Green 2017) he is uninterested in adding to the ever-increasing mass of objects in the world. Instead he asks; how do we think of production in our times? How (and what) can we produce without producing objects? And if the answer is relational, conceptual, abstract, one might also ask, how can the results of such work avoid the pitfalls of creating the material conditions that inadvertently buttress the more insidious dimensions of the 'experience economy' more concerned with the metrics of participation, than it is with the aesthetics of the work or the quality of that engagement?

In this article I will interrogate two of the fundamental structuring mechanics of the piece, the first is the use of a large numbers of 'participants' or interpreters (henceforth PIs) to enact the collective choreography of the piece, and the second is the use of the individual PI to tell stories or 'conceits' to visitors to the gallery. I do this from the subjective position of a PI: a paid enactor of the piece, who is also a theatre studies academic interested in the insider perspective which 'interpreting' the piece enabled. I worked four-hour shifts, four times a week. Each shift involved up to 70 other

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individuals all employed to produce the work. I did this throughout the period the work was installed in the Turbine Hall (July–October 2012).[3] I use this position to investigate the complex social politics at work in the construction, the execution and the on-going life of the work, which I argue, continues to have resonance five years since its inception and is evidenced in the recent re-installation of the work at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris from October to December 2016 as part of a major exhibition of Seghal's works.

I wish to examine how the proxemics of the piece operated to facilitate perceptual and affective shifts while also investigating the function of the 'conceits': the name used to refer to PI generated stories/conversations with the public over which Sehgal had little control. In particular, I want to reframe a question Claire Bishop has raised when considering relational artworks: if the 'conceits' are about producing 'human relations' then, 'what types of relations are being produced for whom, and why?' (Bishop 2004: 65) By extension, I want to ask what we, as PIs, constantly asked ourselves when considering what sort of conceit we should deliver: What constitutes an interesting story? Who is the story for? How is the telling and retelling of this story affecting the original memory of this event? Does it matter – aren't all memories a kind of fiction? What boundaries should a PI observe for themselves? For the piece? And what is the purpose of a conversation anyway?

The aim is to underscore the richly generative interplay of collective choreography and individual action at work, while at the same time asserting that the labour of enacting the piece through outsourced PIs interacting with the public led to encounters with difference (by which I mean an absence of consensus). This went beyond the recognisable limits associated with more conventional co-production with spectators, or the managed risk of unpredictability inherent in elements of the construction of *These Associations*, to an unanticipated site of much greater precarity: an essentially uncensorable forum for exploring different social relations through face-to-face communication. Whether this can be interpreted as giving a meaningful ethical drive or indeed aesthetic weight to the piece will be interrogated as part of attempting to consider by what means such relational dimensions of the piece can be usefully evaluated.

That said, the fractures that occurred through the performance of conceits happened spontaneously within or at the liminal frayed edges of what was primarily a measured, defined and authored construct that included flux, ambiguity and flexibility as fundamental apparatuses essential for the delivery of this specifically Sehgalian 'constructed situation'- a term Sehgal borrows from the Situationist International to suggest the formation of a particular set-up designed to activate acts of creative participation from the public and to militate against the passive contemplation of the 'spectacle' of the world and their own lives.[4] He uses the term with full awareness that the public is never really passive, to indicate the emphasis he wishes to place on a purposeful public encounter with the potential for on-going resonance. However, unlike the Situationists, and those artists who invest in participatory forms of engagement outside of the regulated sites of dance or art for what

they believe to be emancipatory and/or anti-capitalist purposes, Seghal's choreography deliberately uses a public museum, but not in the conventional manner of art or dance. In common with his earlier work, *The Kiss* (2002) there is no clear separation of the PIs from the public, and for much of the time no theatrical effects to signal 'performance'. Moreover, in *These Associations* his PIs frequently use quotidian actions (e.g. walking, running) and a casual conversational approach so that the boundaries of the piece are harder to discern, and the public can find themselves entangled before they fully appreciate that they have stepped across the threshold into an encounter that others, looking on, may not even be aware is a part of the piece. Notwithstanding the three carefully choreographed sections of *These Associations* that framed and drove the piece, the considerable space for the free flow of action and conceits makes this work distinct and different from many of Sehgal's previous works where the constructed nature of the encounter is far more consistently controlled and visible. E.g.s. *Annlee* (2011), *This is Propaganda* (2002), *This is so Contemporary* (2004), *This is Progress* (2010).

I want to now focus discussion on 'the crowd' or the massed public, prompted by a comment about public institutions in Europe made by Sehgal early in the rehearsal process; that museums, galleries and even theatres in earlier centuries operated to modify the behaviour of the crowd. As the collective choreography of large numbers of PIs interacting with the public entering the Turbine Hall was an intrinsic part of the piece, Sehgal's words resonated with me, particularly because of the turbulent local and global context from which this work emerged, and because the Turbine Hall attracts some of the largest crowds of any international museum space. Indeed, many members of the public go no further than the threshold entrance space, the original Tate Modern director Nicolas Serota stating that '[I]n five years more than twenty million visitors have taken possession of the building itself, notably enjoying the experience of being in the Turbine Hall' (2005: 5). It provides an interesting example of a space that feels and evokes what Jen Harvie refers to as a kind of civic pride born of a sense of collective ownership, while at the same time being a private space imbued with the hegemonic discourse of the museum (2009). For the Turbine Hall, despite its openness and the feeling of freedom suggested by its monumental proportions, remains part of a museum complex, and as such it cannot divorced itself from the disciplinary mechanisms and associated power relations of museum space. The question then is whether Sehgal's piece could provide a counter narrative in this context.

According to William Egginton, writing about the evolution of 'the crowd', when the population in European cities was steadily growing:

> […] what cannot be refuted is the development, in the new urban settings of the seventeenth century, of a consciousness of mass identities and the open theorization of the possibility and desirability of controlling or 'guiding' masses of individuals through the manipulation of popular cultural institutions.
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> (Schnapp and Tiews cited in Egginton 2006: 99–100)

Extensive efforts continue to be made by public institutions and governing bodies to modify crowd action through the design and control of public spaces and buildings, that is, to minimize the perceived risk to the institution of self-aware collectivity.

Egginton discusses the role of theatres in providing entertainment as a particular focus for crowds and how this could be considered a covert means of control. Entertainments in theatres could not be fully appreciated by the large groups involved without a set of mutually respectful viewing conventions. In observing these conventions and being exposed to productions that reflected desirable contemporary mores of class and gender, the potential of the group for disruptive activity could, up to a point, be managed. This is not to ignore the ways in which theatre at this time broke with such conventions but to note that usually the net result was a re-inscription of the status quo (Schnapp and Tiews cited in Egginton 2006: 100). Egginton argues that theatre as an institution could be seen to provide a 'testing ground' for mechanisms of social control that might be appropriated to other contexts of public place. Indeed, Tony Bennett, adapting Foucault's model of disciplinary power to the museum, has argued that the museum has since the nineteenth century, when the masses were first permitted, indeed encouraged as a form of self-improvement to engage with spectacles of display in ways previously reserved for the aristocracy, participated in mutual surveillance and spectacle. And that this in turn is about much more than seeing and being seen, this engagement is about the development of people as citizens, an environment in which people are allowed 'to know rather than be known, to become subjects rather than objects of knowledge […] and then to regulate themselves' (Bennett 1995: 63). According to Bennett, the gallery and the museum played a crucial role in the evolution of the modern state, viewed as 'a set of educative and civilizing agencies' that importantly had and have a more permanent presence than that afforded the episodic disciplinary power of the scaffold (Bennett 1995: 66). Moreover, unlike the spectacle of suffering used to place people in opposition to power, the 'exhibitionary complex', as Bennett terms it, was used as a means of enabling people, citizens, to see themselves as indirectly aligned with power, and that this power, was understood as being used to 'organize and co-ordinate an order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order' for the good of all (Bennett 1995: 67). The beauty and achievement represented by the objects on display and the display space itself, was a reflection of their collective achievement and power as members of that society. However, this did not mitigate against the continued fear of the behaviour of crowds in public spaces, something that continued to be discussed by museum and policy-makers throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed, Egginton points towards a shift in emphasis from a worry, prevalent in the seventeenth century, that large numbers of people together would be unruly, to a more recent fear that the crowd might gain a sense of themselves as a cohesive group and thus begin to appreciate their collective potential; potential that came to be realized in the numerous revolutionary events of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Extensive efforts continue to be made by public institutions and governing bodies to modify crowd action through the design and control of public spaces and buildings, that is, to minimize the perceived risk to the institution of self-aware collectivity. This is also reflected in the numerous policy documents and

discussion that takes place on the management and policing of crowds in any public space. In some instances this has resulted in the transformation of formerly important sites of public gathering and protest into gentrified neutralized spaces: Parliament Square in London being a far from isolated example.[5]

Crowds have long been characterized as generating heightened emotions; an effect that can quickly spread between members of the group so that exaltation or fear or any other expression of sensation passes from person to person with speed (McDougall 1927: 25). Furthermore, an individual may under these circumstances lose a degree of self-consciousness and to some extent become 'depersonalized'; with the associated risk of having a diminished sense of personal responsibility as the usual internalized structures that operate self-restraint and a sense of 'decorum and enlightened behaviour' recede (McDougall 1927: 41). This is one of the reasons why the fear of both the chaotic and non-chaotic crowd remained dominant in the twentieth century. This fear has not abated in the opening decades of the twenty-first century but the crowds themselves and responses to those crowds have become increasingly visible and viral, spreading through social as well as news media. Indeed, the visibility of such crowds can be used to exaggerate the dangers of massed humanity and Sehgal's choreographic choices certainly allowed both PIs and the public to reflect upon contemporary anxieties, anxieties that have resurged in the wake of the recent refugee crisis associated with the conflict in Syria/Iraq.

Although the state rhetoric associated with crowd control in the United Kingdom might appear to be as much concerned with public safety as with the potential for disruption in public places, the professed emphasis on safety can also be read as a more broadly palatable means of ensuring more insidious forms of power over the massed and moving public can operate with comparative freedom. This has become increasing pervasive in the years following *These Associations*, but even in 2012, *These associations* as a microcosm of society operated with and in relation to those anxieties, exploring the potentialities and the limits of group generated behaviour. At times this had the public genuinely concerned about their own and others safety because there was no easy means by which to determine who were the PIs and who were the public, so for example when the action of PIs turned to collectively sprinting at speed through the Turbine Hall, the public were not able to readily determine whether this was the action of a random and unruly crowd of people bent on disrupting the space and potentially causing harm, a flash mob, or something else. This was exacerbated by the deliberate 'signature' lack of signage to indicate that a Sehgal work was installed in the space, the intermittent shift of the piece outside of the Turbine Hall into adjoining areas, and the fact that the piece took place throughout the opening hours of the museum, with PIs in place before the Turbine Hall opened and present until every member of the public had departed. However, despite the de-centring these elements suggest (and for those who were not primed, they were definitely disconcerting), it is important to note that these features have come to characterize the

Sehgalian style in the same way that he insists on the museum as the context for his works. Indeed, he is quoted as stating:

> I'm interested in the political efficiency of the museum – it is still one of the main agents of cultural values, and over time, offers a possibility for long term politics. It is a place where one can influence discourse in the future perfect tense: 'This will have been the past'.
>
> (Hantelmann 2010: 136)

As I have noted, this view stands in contrast to the critical art discourse that rejects the museum as a site for radical rethinking because of its association with the promotion of neo-liberalist ideals (Wu 2003; Kundu and Kalin 2015). In this instance, the overall liminality of the Turbine Hall's specificity as public-entrance-civic-space, made the rapid mass sprints provocative[6] and represented one of the many oscillations that occurred between visible and less visible action. Even as a constructed crowd, we were middle and working class individuals from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, ages and ethnicities and to some degree we were able to simultaneously reflect back to the Turbine Hall's visitors both a sense of the disparity of multiple individuals occupying this 'public' space as well as our collective formation as 'citizens' actively 'regulating' ourselves in overtly performative ways, as a sort of paratheatrical commentary on the museum/exhibition space itself.

The 'crowd' as chorus

The incanted songs used in *These Associations* (2012) borrow from texts written by Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt. This, like every element of the piece, was orally delivered to PIs who learnt through repetition. Through such activities, PIs in *These Associations* (2012) could be seen to have in some ways adopted a self-regulatory model of behaviour; it often appeared unified and conformed to the action that it had been rehearsed to present - an accelerating walk, a prescribed game. As a result of these strictures, this constructed public of PIs appeared engaged in purposeful activity complete with an externally observable strategy. Each PI, as simple agent, operated in a directed manner in relation to the other agents with which he or she was surrounded, despite the continually changing indices prescribed by the rules of a particular choreographed game that may have provided the catalyst for group movement through space. However, as the weeks passed and the boredom that comes with multiple repetitions and increasing levels of fatigue set in for participants, the risk of a more disruptive 'unruly' sort of collective action emerged. In this instance the danger of the crowd of participants was not to do with chaos or non-chaotic unity, but with collective inertia: the group was failing to always main-

tain the energetic drive of the piece. Katerina Paramana recognized and has described this shift as coinciding with what she saw, as a PI, as the change of emphasis from the 'care' of the piece to one of 'management' of the work. As Paramana has argued, this shift was evidence of how the resistant potential of the piece had, over time, 'evaporated' and was instead reproducing the sort of 'neo-liberal governmentality' it had aimed to critique: the individual interpreter was essentially made responsible for their own well being, working inside a piece that made continual physical and emotional demands of those involved in its co-creation. These demands, as Paramana sees it, worked against the collective and innovative model of sociality originally promoted by Sehgal's practice (2014: 84). While I agree with Paramana that the ideals of the piece did not necessarily match their embodiment in practice, Sehgal did attempt to militate against the initial symptoms of physical and psychological fatigue described above through the construction of a fourth sequence that deliberately tapped into the chaotic potential of this constructed crowd and diverted the waning energies into what came to be referred to as 'free-flow' action. Less orderly and contained, 'free-flow' allowed for an alternative form of self-generated choreography. For many PIs, this was the time when the piece felt most alive but it did not, I would argue, reach towards a truly productive unruliness that might have emerged out of greater degrees of collective or individual dissent. The organizing principles, the structures that participants worked within and had become customary, were reconfigured in ways that the group determined spontaneously. As a participant, my sense of the potentiality of these moments generated excitement and a heightened receptivity to the actions and sounds of my fellow participants, the public and the shared space we occupied. I attuned myself more acutely to all that was happening around me in this unpredictable field of public play. However, this crowd-generated improvisation would have been much more generative and problematic to the 'correct' functioning of the piece (if we accept that Sehgal had a clear idea of the parameters for what was acceptable and what exceeded the rules of his structures) if PIs had not already fully embodied the piece and had that knowledge base with which to work. In other words, the embodied practices that had been repeated and repeated in the preceding weeks provided the framework from which the collective could rift and embellish during these times of free-flow. When this happened, my sense of the 'participants as crowd' was superficially of their increased empowerment, underscored by a residual respect for Sehgal, which prevented individuals moving away entirely from the actions and text of the piece. The constant oscillation and tension created by the dynamic shifts between individual initiative, group consensus, the public's own interventions and 'unruly' diversions, allowed for risk in play; the material of the piece agitated and teased providing an essential safety valve but not one that produced the sort of fraying that I will later argue the 'conceits' did. Like the transitory nature of the carnival's reversals, this free-flow movement was never intended to be completely unbounded and our sense of increased empowerment was surface and fleeting.

The individual in and beyond the crowd

I now want to interrogate individual subjectivity and one of the most striking elements of the piece; the direct and personal encounter with the public. Those who received, transmitted or witnessed these moments of the piece at close hand were aware of how this delicate engagement had the potential to shift the attention and ambience of the individual visitor. The sense of intimacy to which I am referring was largely derived from PIs carrying out conceits for the public. Conceit, as outlined in the introduction, was the term used to refer to a personal story that PIs formulated from their own history and delivered to members of the public. Conceits could deal with one of the prescribed themes of arrival, departure, belonging, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, feeling overwhelmed or admiration of a person known to the PI.

As with every aspect of the work, the process for delivery of conceits was described to PIs by Sehgal, rehearsed and then reinforced by his producer Asad Raza and the production team thereafter. There were a number of conceit rehearsals before the work opened to the public, but there was really nothing to prepare PIs for the totally 'un-English' activity of walking up to a stranger, telling a personal story and attempting to start a conversation. The starting point of telling the story could act as an end in itself, for instance, if the visitor chose to simply listen. Or it could be used as a catalyst for a discussion. The conversation was supposed to be grounded in a specific time i.e. 'when I was twenty[…]' and would continue for as long as the PI judged it to be remaining 'on topic'. If the focus shifted to a wider question about the artwork itself or degenerated into a chat then the PI was to cut off the interaction.

The art of conversation

During rehearsals and at a public event at the Goethe Institute, Sehgal made reference to Mary Vidal's book *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art Literature, and Talk in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century France* (1992) which argues that Watteau's painted representations of conversations demonstrated both that a high value was placed on the skill, and that dialogue was at the centre of sociability. It also stressed the importance Watteau himself placed on these situations. Indeed, Watteau's painting 'moves from showing talk as social custom to representing conversation as aesthetic form' (Vidal 1992: 8), reflecting values of the period that held verbal forms of exchange superior to written ones.

> Watteau's age was an age when honnêteté, and its corresponding virtues of wit, worldliness, and affability, were the measures of merit, and polite discourse was the principle form used by a person of quality to display his or her learning and culture.
>
> (Vidal 1992: 1)

For a twenty-first century artist, this did seem an unusual point of reference, particularly as the conversationalists of this time were clearly the most privileged members of society who had the requisite leisure time for social intercourse that the working classes did not. Vidal contrasts the development and refinement of conversational ability with that of the modern world where the number of hours spent working and the drive for an individualized sense of identity and achievement have all but eradicated this form of deliberate and measured interaction. In this century where so much communication comes in the form of electronic 'texts' of one sort or another, the emphasis placed on speech over written or visual text that was the significant feature of Watteau's world and art, begins to have a little more resonance with Sehgal's proposition in *These Associations* (2012). But Vidal also argues that the bourgeoisie sought to emulate their aristocratic 'superiors' in the belief that if good conversation indicated good breeding and improved social status, then the bourgeoisie would like to be seen to be engaging with it. Is Sehgal's use of conversations in the context of the Turbine Hall indicative of something similar? Or could the opportunity for any visitor to have an unpremeditated conversation point towards something else? In the context of economic recession that has been the hallmark of this decade in the United Kingdom, where many are unemployed or underemployed, and where the impact on younger people has been most marked, does the opportunity for face-to-face talk offer a chance to exercise cultural capital? Does it evidence the presence, intellect, awareness and desires of everyday people who come to this civic space for an experience and/or exchange when material objects as signifiers of status have become more remote or simply inaccessible? The popularity of this piece with younger people (under 30 years of age) suggests that this indeed was a factor in its success as a form of public art made with the public. But one could also more cynically interpret these fragmentary encounters sharing intimacies with strangers as more symptomatic of or aligned with the predilection for casual social media exchanges where boundaries between public/private have all but eroded and where a narrative of the sensational or scurrilous is equally likely to go viral, as we browse encounter drop and move on to the next item that piques our curiosity and fractured concentration. Rather than the emancipatory and democratic power accorded by Bourriaud to relational art, where art is believed to produce relations between people, rather than being a site of contemplation and reflection of those relationships, and where the activity itself is considered to carry political and ethical weight, what function does a conversation, in this instance, talking with PIs of *These Associations* serve? And how does this relate to the context of the work as a whole or indeed the larger socio-political context of this time? By which I mean the gathering of crowds associated with the Arab Spring, the Occupy/ Post Occupy movement, and other public protests over the actions of government when people choose to gather in public space[7] (or in the case of Donald Trump's inauguration, absence themselves from the National Mall) as a highly visible means of voicing concerns/being heard.

the long hours during which interpreters engaged with the practice of conceits meant that the potential for the exploration of dissonance and the irreconcilable was as substantial as the drive to seek commonality.

Claire Bishop's unpicking of Bourriaudian claims in 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics' is a useful starting point. She questions the assumption that relational artworks that permit 'dialogue' are 'democratic and therefore good' (Bishop 2004: 65). The dialogue evolving from the presentation of a conceit to a member of the public within *These Associations* ignores the disparity in power relations between PIs who notionally have control over the mechanisms of production (i.e. they know the story they will tell and to whom they will tell it), whereas the public, do not. The PI also takes control over the time spent on delivering a conceit, judging when the conversation has exhausted its potential and ending the interaction, sometimes abruptly, with the words, 'This is a work by Tino Sehgal', thus eliminating any misunderstanding that the intimacy of the conversational exchange is really a random meeting with a talkative stranger. Moreover, within the framework of Sehgal's original instructions on the performance of conceits by PIs, there is little room for the sort of productive antagonism that Bishop sees as 'inimical to democracy' (Bishop 2004: 66). Drawing upon Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's notion of antagonism where the model of subjectivity envisaged enjoys neither the sense of completeness that we would normally view as a prerequisite of active agency in the world, nor the dissolution or 'psychosis' associated with a 'decentered' self (Bishop 2004: 66). Subjectivity instead involves a process of 'identification' resulting from this condition of incompleteness, and antagonism '[…]is the relationship that emerges between such incomplete entities' (Bishop 2004: 66). Not the clash of contrasting viewpoints we might associate with antagonistic engagement between 'full identities' but recognition of 'the presence of what is not me [which] renders my identity precarious and vulnerable, and that threat that the other represents transforms my *own* [original emphasis] sense of self into something questionable' (Bishop 2004: 66). Bishop uses this idea of antagonism to challenge the claims Bourriaud makes for the productive and democratic potential of 'microtopias' created by artworks that elicit participation through such things as cooking (Rirkrit Tiravenija), gardening (Abraham Cruzvillegas) or other forms of constructed interactivity that is predominantly restricted to an in-crowd of participants familiar with the language of participatory art practice. Through this limit, Bishop claims, the artwork divests itself of any capacity to drive change or carry force, democratic or otherwise.

So did Sehgal's conceits fail in this manner? At first glance or iteration, I would say yes, they failed to enact the sort of antagonism discussed by Bishop. Indeed, if PIs had rigidly performed as formally instructed then the scope for antagonism would have been minimal, but the long hours during which PIs engaged with the practice of conceits meant that the potential for the exploration of dissonance and the irreconcilable was as substantial as the drive to seek commonality. Again, this is where *These Associations* is distinct from most other works by Sehgal. Conversations, and from a PI's point of view, the awareness of the multiple, often intimate narratives taking place in the space, could result in a powerful sense of dissociation, even estrangement. What is taking place here? Is this a debate? Is this therapy? Is any of this real? Credible? Purposeful? My own sense of

vulnerability/uncertainty was further exacerbated when the rawness of an individual visitor's personal situation collided with my/the interpreter's conceit in such a way that the real emotional condition of the visitor was exposed, the relative ineptitude of my/the interpreter's response in the face of such directness and honesty only underscored the uncertainty about what was taking place. What was I doing? The already indistinct boundaries between 'performance' and the 'real' ceased to exist, opening up a space of awkwardness, disjuncture, discomfort. How long could I bear it? How long should I bear it?

I would argue that the work manifests the most generative potential when these breakdowns or fraying occurred, exposing the 'dis-identification' at work when both interpreters and visitors recognized their 'not like them-ness', but in identifying and acknowledging the failure inherent in instigating a contrived conversation with a stranger, the process occasionally pushed beyond these us/them limits to a kind of re-identification. Rather than the relational antagonism referred to by Bishop, what sometimes emerged through the practice of conceits, I would argue, had more in common with Chantal Mouffe's formulation of agonistic relations.

Mouffe argues that in a pluralist society there will always be conflicts for which there is no rational resolution: this is the root of the antagonism that characterizes all human societies (2005: 154). Mouffe identifies two paradigms of liberal thought that attempts to respond to and temper such antagonism, the 'aggregative' and the 'deliberative'. The first is interested in compromise to ensure that the 'best interests' of all parties are served. The second, developed in response to the first, 'aims at creating a link between morality and politics' so that 'instrumental rationality' is replaced by 'communicative rationality'. That is, communicative rationality seeks to use free discussion to achieve ends that draw upon the ethical and moral dimensions of an argument. In both instances, there is an attempt to instigate a liberal consensus, however, as Mouffe sees it, the very nature of antagonism means that such consensus is not possible and is in fact not necessarily desirable.

Instead, Mouffe offers agonism. An agonism that maintains the 'we/them' relation where the conflicting parties acknowledge that there is no rational solution to their conflict, but they are nevertheless prepared to recognize the legitimacy of their opponents: opponents that Mouffe describes as 'adversaries' rather than 'enemies'. This means that, 'while in conflict they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place' (Mouffe 2005: 157).

Mouffe's agonistic model of struggle between adversaries (rather than enemies) refuses the presentation of public space as an open territory where consensus or compromise might be reached. Instead, it recognizes that public space as multiple, pluralistic and lacking in any sort of centre indicative of unity. It recognizes the impossibility of 'consensus without exclusion': that consensus necessarily results in a divisive 'we/them' and that fundamentally the idea of 'inter-subjective communication, free of constraints and where the participants arrive at consensus by means of

rational argumentation' runs counter to the restraints inherent in what Mouffe (via Žižek and Lacan) refers to as the authority/authoritarianism of discourse itself, which prevents any sort of 'ideal speech situation' from ever emerging (Mouffe 2005: 158–59). In other words, dissent is recognized and acknowledged rather than resisted or rejected. It signals precarity and perhaps the fragility of the existing order, but therein lies its productive potential. I want to suggest that in the context of *These Associations* and in particular in the device of the conceit, this precarity was, in rare moments, inadvertently exposed. In its original 2012 installation, the London riots, the Occupy London movement and the protests associated with the Arab Spring in 2011/2012 formed the back drop and heightened the sense in which the possibility of a different, perhaps more equitable (?) order might be imagined. Just four years later, in its 2016 presentation at the Palais de Tokyo, *These Associations* is viewed in a contrasting context, woven through with the complexities of the Paris attacks of 2015. The public antagonism inherent in the actions of terrorists promotes a different imagining of a future world and has fuelled protectionist and anti-immigration rhetoric and action. The crowds that gathered in response to these attacks were crowds of mourning and collective dismay. More than ever, political events and actions draw attention to irreconcilable, dissenting voices. One could argue that if anything, the need for agonistic encounter has increased substantially since 2012.

In 2012 we were fortunate that the Turbine Hall, or what Jen Harvie has described as 'a special civic room' (2009), provided considerable potential for engagement between multiple and reasonably diverse publics because correctly or incorrectly, the public perception and positioning of the Turbine Hall, is predominantly as a freely available, open, threshold space between the outside world of London's Southbank and London SE1, and the more formal gallery spaces of this museum. Moreover, in 2012, interpreters were left open to a multitude of reactions and 'conversational' responses: embarrassment, delight, silence, rage, confessional exposure, confusion, tears, rage, laughter, shock, irritation and at best, rare moments of a sort of relational agonism. I want to argue, in summary answer to my earlier questions: that conceits had the potential and did sometimes generate an experience akin to an agonistic encounter. These instances, revealed an underlying but important and potentially productive conflict, a relational agonism that might be considered the heart of the best dialogues brokered. But in my view, such conversations were a byproduct rather than the intention of the conceits. This draws attention to the dependence of the piece on both serendipity and the willing (and sometimes not so willing) emotional labour of PIs. This latter claim is supported by something Sehgal said on the final day of the piece, when Sehgal took a moment to express his thanks to all PIs. At this time he drew attention to his own surprise at the manner in which PIs had engaged with the challenge of delivering conceits. His words expressed an awareness of the depth of PIs' commitment, and their willingness and generosity in exploring and exploiting difficult personal and political territory in their efforts to give structure, meaning and purpose to this activity. For unlike *This Progress* (2010), PIs did not spend a largely pre-determined length of time

talking with a visitor before their conversation segued with that of the next PI in linear fashion[8] – an approach that might be considered to have the advantage of limiting visitor and PI engagement to a sequential conversation with more and more mature PIs who guided the visitor's progression through the gallery, thus reducing both the risk and the opportunity of generating agonism. Instead, the open-endedness of an encounter in *These Associations* meant that we as PIs could stay for extended periods of time in ambivalent engagement as if rehearsing a different model of democratic conflict, the material and psychical conditioning of the museum constructing a framework that perhaps mitigated against the more destructive antagonism inherent in familiar manifestations of open dissent. Furthermore, the construction and recounting of personal narratives, memories disrupted by and through the retelling, response and retelling, reinforced the sense that not only was it not possible to find consensus with the person receiving the conceit, but nor could I reach a consensus within myself about the veracity of the memory I was drawing upon: heightening the sense of the fluidity and precarity of my own identity. I want to suggest that it was the state of instability and flux evident in the dialogue that emerged out of conceits that proved to be an attractive feature of the piece for many visitors to the Turbine Hall, considerable numbers of which were repeat visitors. In sharing my shaped and reshaped memory in a conceit, and leaving it open to the inevitable re- and mis-interpretation of a member of the public, I personalized for a moment, a filament of the collective 'crowd' enacted in other parts of the piece. This person-to-person conversation presents itself in sharp contrast to social media's promissory narrative of a direct, individual and personalized electronic platform for exchange with friends and potentially with a global community. A narrative that frequently disguises – although I am not necessarily implying a directed intentionality – the presence of a virtual and uncontainable crowd, ever ready to respond to and contagiously proliferate dominant points of view as well as multiple voices in a way that suggests free speech, but may also be interpreted as enacting a degree of enforced consensus.

Sehgal, unlike many artists and artworks that have been described as engaging with Bourriaudian 'relational aesthetics' as a social form implicitly or explicitly expressing critique or disengagement with capitalist transaction, has never contested his participation in the economies of exchange that make his work possible; he receives payment for his labour and so do all those officially employed to produce and enact the work. Whilst the public visiting the Turbine Hall are not remunerated as they have been in one previous work *This is Exchange* (2003), they do not pay to enter the Turbine Hall, and are not under any obligation to participate in the choreography that takes place there.[9] *These Associations* (2012) offered an opportunity for engagement that draws on the tradition of the civic centre, public square or forum as a place where you might purposefully bring someone for conversation, leisure or debate. In coming together in the 'public' space of the Turbine Hall, evocative to some degree, of the numerous examples of crowds gathering to have their voices heard and their physical presence witnessed in the last six years, the coming together of publics open up opportunities for

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numerous types of conversation and dissent. *These Associations* (2012) brought contrived publics (or PIs) and random publics (free agents) together through the production of set choreography, free form action and provocative stories to listen to, loathe, argue about, ignore, upset or enjoy. It works with a contemporary sensibility that allows the public to come and go; attend for short episodes or engage for extended periods of times or on multiple occasions. To a large extent the piece demanded as little or as much as the public themselves determined and opened up a space for the consideration of what the choreographed actions of a collective could achieve in engaging with each other so directly and so disarmingly. Its resonance continues both in the community of participants who five years later continue to meet physically and virtually on a more or less regular basis, and through its recent iteration at the Palais de Tokyo in the autumn of 2016 that included many PIs from the original 2012 installation. However, at the Palais de Tokyo many works by Sehgal were brought together in something like a mini retrospective. We could see the twirling form of a couple performing *The Kiss*, consumed by the approach of a slow walking group of *These Associations* PIs chanting the translated text of Arendt, before our attention is shifted to a quieter space where the reanimated figure of *Annlee* (2011) might talk at us. I would suggest that this convergence mitigated against the sort of generative agonism I claim emerged in isolated instances at the Turbine Hall, even though the context and location in Paris might be considered in even greater need of a space for such encounter.

The narratives that formed a central element of *These Associations* (2012) as delivered in the space of the Turbine Hall inconsistently and unpredictably offered at worst, straight-forward, safe, slickly delivered stories from a stranger or, more rarely and radically, a disjunctive experience of relational agonism that could be understood as a rehearsal for a more sophisticated navigation of views that are not, and cannot, be our own. This is where the work had generative edge and provided a counter to what Mouffe has suggested is too easily dismissed by critiques of art practice that exist within an institutional context and are seen as simply reinforcing neo-liberal consensus. A model of practice in the museum that works against the discourse of withdrawal from such sites, but instead creates something to underscore 'the importance of reposting new modes of coexistence, of contributing to the construction of new forms of collective identity' and alternative subjectivities (Mouffe 2012), subjectivities that reflect the zeitgeist and the challenge and insecurity of being part of nebulous, pluralistic, divisive publics.

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Notes

1. Statement made by Sehgal, 'Tino Sehgal in Conversation' (Dercon et al. 2012).

2. The sculptural nature of Sehgal's work is discussed in Dorothea von Hantelmann (2010).

3. The trend and ethics of delegating or mediating the live moment of an artist's work to paid or unpaid people or communities is something investigated by Claire Bishop in her exhibition and book *Double Agent* where Bishop notes that '[A]uthenticity was relocated from the singular body of the artist to the collective authenticity of the social body […]' (2008: 111).

4. *These Associations* (2012) as a 'constructed situation' can be briefly and reductively described as a series of choreographed group actions that included movement, games and songs enacted by PIs employed and paid to carry out the work of the piece. These actions were interspersed with the action of individual PIs, who periodically broke away from the rest of the group's actions, approached and spoke directly to gallery visitors to offer a story and initiate a conversation on a small range of set themes determined by Sehgal.

5. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-the-provisions-relating-to-parliament-square-and-surrounding-area. Accessed 3 March 2017.

6. Small children occasionally cried and there was the odd instance when someone would be knocked over or accidentally hit.

7. Anusha Kedhar has noted the significance of crowds of people engaging in choreographic gestures like the 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' response to the shooting of Michael Brown, where the raising of ones hands was repeated by 'young black men and women in Ferguson, Tibetan monks from India, black Harvard law students, school children in Missouri, young people in Moscow, and a church congregation in New York City' as a means of collectively protesting injustice, sharing concern with a wider community via social media, and drawing specific attention to the ways in which black people in the United States have learnt to modify their physical actions when dealing with the police, in order to avoid the real risk of being shot. http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/protest-in-ferguson/. Accessed 20 March 2017.

8. *This Progress* (2010) performed at the Guggenheim, was described in the *New York Times*:

    '[…] visitors were ushered up the spiral ramp by a series of guides – first a child, then a teenager, then an adult and finally an older person – who asked them questions related to the idea of progress. Over the course of several hours-long shifts a week for the six-week run of the show, each of these guides, or "interpreters" as Mr. Sehgal calls them, spent a few minutes walking and talking with one or more visitors at a time, then moved on to the next.'
    (Desantis 2010)

9. *This is Exchange* (2003) if a visitor chose to engage in a discussion of the market economy they could get half their entry fee returned to them.