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The Rôle of Gesture in the Work of Tino Sehgal

Introduction

This essay looks at a central aspect of Tino Sehgal's practice – the coupled concepts of production and deproduction. The artist proposes these two, simultaneous activities as presenting a new economics of production, opposing current social and traditional artistic practices.

This activity suggests an aspect of immateriality within the work which has been likened to Giorgio Agamben's 'gesture' (Bishop, 2005) in that it opposes means and ends with a renewed emphasis on a state in between, not as an end in itself nor as a method of becoming, but as an "endurance and the exhibition of the media character of corporal movement" which Agamben calls "mediality." (Agamben, 1992, p. 57)

I will start by looking at gesture from the point of view of Agamben's writings on the subject, then take an overview of Sehgal's work and the issues arising from it. Following this I'll attempt to link gesture with the work's issues and discuss the benefits of such a concept to Sehgal's work and what implications this may have.

Gesture

I will look at two essays by Agamben published in the early '90s that centre on the term 'gesture.' *Kommerell, or On Gesture* (1991) and *Notes on Gesture* (1992) are both based on what appear to be the same set of notes, with duplicate passages in both texts, however the overriding subject matter changes in each case. The former discusses the writings of the

German literary critic Max Kommerell and his relationship to the circle of Stefan George. Gesture in this case is discussed in a literary setting. The latter is a less polished set of notes outlining the development of the scientific study of gesture and the role cinema would play in its understanding, beginning with Gilles de la Tourette and touching in only a few pages on Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Deleuze's theory of cinema, Aristotle, Edward Muybridge and a number of other writers.

The gesture is an activity or an action (a 'means') that has no *telos*, either that towards which it is directed, nor as embodied in itself.

Nothing is more misleading for an understanding of gesture, therefore, than representing, on the hand, a sphere of means as addressing a goal . . . and, on the other hand, a separate and superior sphere of gesture as a movement that has its end in itself. (Agamben, 1992, p. 57)

It can be recognised by the fact that in it "nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported." (Agamben, 1992, p. 56) The example given is taken from Varro of a general who does not 'make' or 'act' but 'carries on' affairs.

The implications of gesture developed by Agamben in these texts relate to the idea of the realisation of a 'being-in-a-medium' of human beings. Agamben specifically links this to the sphere of the *ethos* – gesture "opens the ethical dimension for [humans]". (Agamben, 1992, p. 57)

The gesture is . . . communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality. (Agamben, 1992, p. 58)

This account of gesture has major implications for actions in society, and for art in particular, whereby, rather than working towards a product or commodity—a traditional view of the art-making activity where creating an object is one of its *raison d'être*—or seeing the act as in itself productive of meaning—something performance or strands of conceptual art promote—the concept of gesture denies both these aims and creates a ‘third way,’ avoiding being drawn into the role of producer of objects.

. . . if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends. (Agamben, 1992, p. 56)

Without further explanation Agamben ends the piece with the statement that “politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings.” (Agamben, 1992, p. 59) This makes clear that, for Agamben at least, neither the means nor the ends serve as adequate goals, indeed the concept of goals is a mistaken one. The gesture as pure mediality, as pure activity, is the way that he suggests will—at a basic level—enable us to see what we are doing when we do things (our being-in-a-medium) and ultimately bring *life* back to politics.

Later in this essay I’ll try to show how Tino Sehgal keys into this understanding of gesture and how his works make real the possibilities inherent in it.

Tino Sehgal – Selected works

The following is a selected list of the artist’s works with short descriptions:

- 2000 **Instead of allowing something to rise up to your face dancing
bruce and dan and other things**
An interpreter writhing on the gallery floor.
- 2001 **This is good**
“. . . gallery guards singing . . . thrashing their arms about in circles
while jumping from leg to leg.” (Bishop, 2005)
- 2002 **This is propaganda**
“. . . a brief, ghostly recording by an unidentified woman singing "this is
propaganda, you know, you know" (from a pop song); the recording is
triggered whenever someone passes by an unmarked spot in the
room.” (Gabri, 2003)
- 2003 **This is right**
“. . . interpretations of [Sehgal's] own back catalogue – by two
children . . . and by his Belgian gallerist . . .” (Bishop, 2005)
- 2003 **Le Plein**
An empty gallery. When a visitor enters the space the attendant steps
out of the office and says “Ceçi n'est pas le vide.” (“This is not the
void” – a reference to Yves Klein's *Le Vide*)
- 2004 **This exhibition**
“. . . a woman collapses for no apparent reason, lolls about on the floor
and then stands up and says calmly: 'Tino Sehgal. This exhibition.
2004. Courtesy the artist.'” (Frenzel, 2005)

2004 **This is competition**

At an art fair, two of Sehgal's representing galleries have stalls next to each other. The staff on each stand are only allowed to say alternate words in sentences with their partners on the other stand supplying the remaining words.

2004/5 **This objective of that object**

First of three annual shows at London's ICA. A group of interpreters approach the visitor and who must attempt to initiate a discussion with them about the artwork.

2006 **This progress**

The middle show of the trilogy at the ICA. A series of conversations with progressively ageing interpreters, coupled with a tour of the gallery spaces.

2007 **This Success or This Failure**

The last of the three ICA shows. ". . . a group of schoolchildren . . . spend each day playing without the aid of objects." (Coburn, 2007)

(unexecuted) **Alteration to a Suburban Household**

". . . a couple agree to mirror—or rather invert—each other's habitual roles and mannerisms whenever receiving a guest." (Bishop, 2005)

The theatrical nature of Sehgal's works make their relations with their audience a primary concern, creating the problematics that the works address, which depend to a large extent on the identity of the audience involved.

The problematics can broadly be categorised as follows:

- The pieces' status as an art 'object';
- their nature as objects to be considered;
- the process of production involved in their existence.

To address these, one must be more specific to whom the works are addressed at any one time. These audiences can also be broadly categorised:

- the general art-going public
- the participant in the piece in question
- the writer/reviewer of the piece in question

It can be said that the works do not have any 'life' outside of an audience. They rely on reception to initiate them and interaction to 'make' them – but the precise nature of that 'make' is defined by the particular audience being addressed.

In terms of problematics, I'll here focus on the object-status of the pieces, the formation of their audiences and the activity of writing about them.

Object-status

The artist actively avoids anything which could be seen as an object in relation to his pieces, either of the piece, or any physical objects left over from the event. Similarly there is little or no record of the work except what visitors take away with them in their memories. The works rely almost exclusively on memory for their extended 'life' beyond the actual event in the original site. These may then be committed to paper or other forms of record by reviewers or commentators, but essentially the works live on only by the mediation of another, the audience that experienced them.

This would seem to reflect the fact that the pieces themselves only really exist in the first place by virtue of their audience – there is a great reliance on interaction between the interpreters and the visitor in the making of the experience of the work. The artist creates a set of rules for the situation, which the interpreters are asked to follow and interpret as they see fit – the use of the word ‘interpreters’ by the artist to describe the people employed to make the piece is an indication of this aspect. These rules can be more or less proscriptive, depending on the piece. In some pieces they allow for a large amount of variation and improvisation on the part of the interpreters and leaving ample space for input by the audience to serve as a guide for the piece.

Sehgal relates the decision to avoid objects and documentation back to his early work in dance, where “one does something without any material product,” resulting in a ‘thing’ which can still be talked about or thought about. (Sehgal, quoted in Frenzel, 2005) This choice is grounded in an critique of the methods of production at play in the world at large and the art-world in particular. Sehgal is firmly against the existing methods of production of objects, a process he sees as merely “affirm[ing] the highly problematic mode of production – the transformation of material.” (Moisdon, 2003)

Why is this a problem? Sehgal points to society’s attachment to technical progress:

. . . development means technology’s transformation of natural resources into ever more refined things. But we already have far more than we need, and the mode of production is not sustainable . . . (Frenzel, 2005)

Sehgal positions as an ethical stance, his practice is a way to avoid adding more objects to the world, against our consumer society. To counter this he works to incorporate the activity of ‘deproduction’ in his work.

Deproduction represents “the possibility of simultaneously making and not making something.” (Bishop, 2005) Sehgal sees his work’s transient nature and lack of residue as a demonstration of this activity. But it’s important not to take the concept of deproduction in isolation – the activity is impossible without production itself and Sehgal points out that “‘deproduction’ in itself isn’t of particular interest to me but the simultaneity of production and deproduction is.” This simultaneity reveals itself in the process of the “transforming of actions” (rather than the “transformation of material”) within his works:

If one does a movement or sings or speaks, then one is obviously producing something. But immediately as a note ends or the movement stops, it is gone: it deproduces itself. (Sehgal, quoted in Griffin, 2005)

Through his pieces Sehgal presents this simultaneity by the various actions that the interpreters are asked to enact and the relations these set up between them and the audience.

The lack of documentary evidence from this practice of production/deproduction can be seen as an effect of this work. They purposefully “evade documentation at all stages” through the construction of “a polished, impregnable closed system” which is described as a “motor” for this effect – some kind of active agent set up by Sehgal within the structure of the work:

The ostensible motor behind these deceptively simple works is the desire for a regime of total immateriality. (Bishop, 2005)

Audience

[He] seems less concerned with subverting or challenging global capitalism, and the art institution, than with making them freshly visible, open to new possibility. (Steeds, 2005)

Recognising his interdependence with the system within which he works and revealing this interdependence to critical analysis serves as Sehgal's method. The works do not try to get away from their embeddedness or pretend that they are autonomous within these structures, a choice that Sehgal sees as naive and misguided. Rather, they *play* with these structures, in an attempt to make them more obvious to the participants.

Play is an important subject for Sehgal. Taking as an example his last piece at the ICA, London, *This Success or This Failure*, the viewer is thrust into the world of a group of children using the gallery as their playground. The use of play allows Sehgal to engage his audience with the work on an unexpected level, catching them off guard and in the process completely enclosing them in the structure of the piece and making them a part of the action. This set up:

. . . render[s] the artist and viewer complicit . . . of the context in which they come about, of the place in which they are exhibited; of the mercantile system which will, in order to sell them, inevitably seek to extract them from the trap. (Moisdon, 2003)

Moisdon presents the works as being “a series of traps . . .” (Moisdon, 2003) which ensnare the visitor, forcing them to become complicit in their creation. For example the action of self-reflexivity and participation in *The Objective of that Object, 2004* whereby the visitor is encouraged to generate the conversation that becomes the subject of the discussion and consequently the object of the work, this is described as a “tautological trap”: “the tautological trap snapped shut: the discussion had become the work, which had the goal of becoming the object of a discussion.” (Frenzel, 2005)

The structures put in play by the “motor” of this piece encourage entry into a closed loop of signification, whereby the initial proposition by the actors becomes an invitation to the audience to solve the riddle of the piece by their participation.

This drawing in of the audience reveals the transformation of the viewer into participant – willing or unwilling, but unable to avoid the role cast for them by the piece itself.

Writing

The extensive use of quotations in the list of artworks above reflects the fact that there is very little ‘original’ documentation of the pieces, for example artist’s statements, photography or recordings. Most information about the pieces comes from anecdotal evidence. These descriptions of the pieces appear not only as off-hand comments in informal publications, such as internet blogs (where one would expect this level of commentary), but also crop up as a common feature of magazine reviews.

Writers attempting to discuss Sehgal’s work find themselves placed in a difficult situation, because the artist deliberately eschews any record of the work, which would seem to be an implicit prohibition on others too. By denying documentation the artist could perhaps be seen to key into strategies of immateriality in conceptual art or of site-specificity, which puts into question any re-creation of the work in another medium.

This problematic has been described as “attempting to give them a title, to describe or to list them, that is, to enter into rivalry with the form of the work itself, which is the affirmation of what it is.” (Moisdon, 2003) This can be misunderstood as an impasse in the process of addressing the works, if by writing about the work one somehow subverts Sehgal’s own attempt to prevent documentation.

Moisdon suggests that the form of the work is also to title themselves, to be a description of their own state and that by doing the same in another venue, she is somehow performing an ‘anomalous’ activity. There is obviously an expectation here that is being thwarted through this anomaly – the expectation that the work of art presents itself as a complete thing-in-itself,

something akin to an object (if not objectified). This would run counter to Sehgal's aims with the works.

Sehgal himself makes clear that writing is a necessary part of the work, as part of its reception:

There was once a review of my work in your magazine in which the writer wondered if, in the very act of writing about my work, she was necessarily betraying it. That's complete nonsense in my view. As with any other art, my work wants to communicate and is dependent on its reception. (Sehgal, quoted in Griffin, 2005)

Gesture and Sehgal

Sehgal's work relates to Agamben's concept of gesture in a sense through its retreat from material form. Sehgal's strategy of no documentation ensures that the materiality of the pieces remains in abeyance (although this action in itself becomes an important discussion point). By taking this approach to residue, the works emphasise the temporary nature of their acts, which in themselves incorporate gestures in the commonly understood sense of the term. For Agamben gesture requires that "nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported" (Agamben, 1992, p. 56) which would seem to be a good description of the experience of a Sehgal piece.

The pieces themselves are often described as being somewhat alienating, ostensibly welcoming the audience into their systems of play but ultimately they only confirm the difference and separation between those taking part in the piece. Again, Agamben suggests that the gesture lives individually, not really creating connection but highlighting the fact that communication—rather than taking place—is purely a matter of the existence of communication:

The gesture is . . . communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality. (Agamben, 1992, p. 58)

Any affect is, as it were, purely internal to the person experiencing it, not something that the piece transfers:

“However compelling it may be for an Other, gesture never exists only for him; indeed, only insofar as it also exists for itself can it be compelling for the Other.”
(Kommerell, quote in Agamben, 1991, p. 78)

Claire Bishop calls on Agamben’s claims for a gestural politics—seen as the purest form of politics—as coterminant with the activities in Sehgal’s sculptures. Gesture—in general, or the gestures taking place in Sehgal’s works—and its remnant in memory—as the requirement for existence of these works—puts the responsibility onto both the audience and the institution for the transmission and evocation—the life—of the works in the future.

But for Sehgal, the site of the piece is still absolutely critical. He has said for instance: “my work belongs in a museum.” (Sehgal, quoted in Frenzel, 2005) This is not however in the sense of site specificity, whereby the piece works in particular geographic location and no other, but in a more general sense of the institutional function taking place around the piece, represented by the piece itself and the audience. Rather than being a repository of material objects, the museum is, for Sehgal, a place where one may influence discourse in the future perfect tense: “This will have been the past.” (Bishop, 2005)

. . . continuous involvement of the present with the past in creating further presents instead of an orientation towards eternity, and simultaneity of production and deproduction instead of economics of growth. (Sehgal, 2002, quoted in Bishop, 2005)

I think Bishop's connection of Agamben with Sehgal works well. She draws attention to the theatrical nature of the works, in the sense that although they exist at all times when the gallery is open (rather than at specific 'performance' times) they address each viewer with a "specific and intensely subjective encounter, a fact that is reflected in the writing on his work to date (for the most part descriptive anecdotes . . .) and in the work's ability to generate orally disseminated narratives." (Bishop, 2005) Thinking of the gesture in relation to writing would mean that the writing would continue the mediality of the work, would become an extension into the world of the work itself.

Overall, the refusal of documentation can be seen as a method of control over the reception of the artwork, enforcing a situation whereby the only way to experience the artwork is to physically attend a presentation and the only way to pass it on is verbally or textually, outside the regime of the gallery or museum. But what does this mean when reviewers or the 'public' are the only ones to write about the pieces and their writings become the only available documentation? There must be an important difference between documentation provided or allowed by the artist and that generated by the visitor.

In a similar point to the one made by Moisdon above, Bishop also suggests that the writing could be seen as denying the pieces: "the weakest link in this conceptual fortress would seem to be the critic who commits the work to paper." (Bishop, 2005) but this would be to misunderstand the action of the pieces. The writings are potential or imminent to the work—another product of the "motor" that the work represents—in that they "stand for and encircle the objective of [Sehgal's] practice" (Bishop, 2005).

Conclusion

So what does gesture tell us about Tino Sehgal's work and what value does it have?

Sehgal's pieces seem a good fit for Agamben's gestic politics – they deliberately eschew a product or remnant of any kind, and implicate the audience in a perpetual game of the confusion of roles with the other participants of the piece. The pieces themselves do not live outside of memory and make the audience physically aware of their role within the institutional context of the gallery or museum and within the piece itself.

Returning to the original source of this reference to Agamben's theory of gesture—Claire Bishop's article in *Artforum*—she claims that 'gesture' is what is produced in these pieces, as opposed to the 'deproduction' of materiality (Bishop, 2005). However, I am not certain if understanding gesture in the realm of production/deproduction is correct, and I'd point to an understanding of the role of gesture as outside of any progress-oriented activity – something which production/deproduction still seems to cling to. To speak of gesture as a 'production' seems to deny its action to prevent production, leaving the audience and interpreter in a state of being-together in the formation of the work of art as forever being but not becoming.

My final question regarding gesture is: can it be seen as a positive or 'worthwhile' thing (by which I mean an act that is worth doing in the first place).

In itself the concept of positive or negative seems to have no place when discussing gesture, in the same way that production/deproduction suggests some kind of progress towards a good or bad state. Agamben sees the act of the pure gesture as the ultimate act of human beings allowing their actions to transcend any reading based on means and ends. He says that, in this state:

Consigned to their supreme gesture, works live on, like creatures bathed in the light of the Last Day, surviving the ruin of their formal garment and their conceptual meaning. (Agamben, 1991, p. 80)

As the supreme gesture of the pieces, we may see this activity as a process of actualising of those involved in the piece – not least the artist himself. Tino Sehgal actualises himself through the pieces at the same time as the interpreters, audience, reviewers, etc. As Aristotle says: “existence is to everyone an object of choice and love, and we exist through activity (because we exist by living and acting); and the maker of the work exists, in a sense, through his activity.” (Aristotle, 1976, 1168a6–9) Gesture can be seen to fulfil this requirement of existence.

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