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An Essay about Tino Sehgal that Should Have Been Published Three Years Ago

By Adam B.

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Foreword

Three years ago, to the amusement of his seasoned friends and acquaintances, the author found himself innocently inspired by the artwork of Tino Sehgal. The encounter could be described as the original impulse which drove him to become better acquainted with the miraculous abomination people refer to as *the art world*. The author was compelled to understand and began writing an essay. He didn't know what it was about. Revelation threatened to degenerate into incommunicable idiocy.

It now seems to the author, after a number of years, that this written record of astonishment at being in time, which Sehgal's work, according to him, lively registers, is worthy of contaminating the greater stream, because it may open for others that experience of the groundlessness, yet situated-ness of history, which the author was mulling over years ago.

The author's thoughts have endured time. He remembers them. It seems to him that they have shaped time. Perhaps that which Sehgal charmingly refers to as subjectivity, which without further delineation, from a strictly philosophical perspective, can mean everything and nothing, is a fitting designation for what's at stake. At certain times, the world, to the surprise of its inhabitants, considers itself.

The author, back then, felt embarrassed by his own enthusiasm. Lest someone accuse him of naivety, he composed another, comic reflection to balance the original

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study whose predominant mood can be described as religious. Now, however, he is no longer embarrassed. He feels, rather, that he is a part of things, is not ashamed. The shorter, jaded reflection, which smacks of judgment and is thus not a pure process of understanding, shall serve as a brief thematic introduction, because it performs the right questions. The long study, which mounted according to some eccentric impetus beyond the author's ken, follows.

The author has given up strategizing in favor of the flow, much vaunted in self-help. He can recommend it, only from his own experience. This is the sense of an original reflection: to say it and see how it feels.

The encounter took place at Martin Gropius Bau in the summer of 2015. The author had the good fortune of experiencing many of Sehgal's works at the same time, same place.

Flippant Introduction

Trying to understand the essence of Tino Sehgal's work, I find myself imagining the destruction of the Library of Alexandria. Nobody knows how many scrolls were lost in the storied burning of that great repository, the ghostly collective presence of generations vanishing in wisps of smoke. It's like the disappearance of some vast mirror pointing at the sky: the heavens' losing sight of the wide blue, the history of the clouds' divagations.

I'm trying to understand what *immateriality* means. In my mind, I see a curator strutting six figures. What's Sehgal peddling? It's like selling "whispering in the library," "dancing in the dark," or "lying at a cocktail party." Anyway, for now, it's *the thing*. The museum is wide awake. The white walls are staring themselves down. A glimpse of ourselves in time. Not eternity encrusted in paint. I've never seen so much action in the land of the sleepers. After a while, though, the subjectivity junkies head home; the excitement in the headlines dies down. People are only sustainably interested in monuments that memorialize suffering. Someone gets hit by a car. During the war,

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Sehgal's work doesn't get lost in a basement. There's nothing there. In a hundred years, it continues as a habit, an institution, a rumor. Or not at all.

So, to understand Sehgal, I find it useful to begin with the loss of the entire record. The disappearance of the material instantiation of the symbolic order. All of it. All that meaning outside the head. Isn't it all *inside* the head? I think I can explain what I mean, but it's essential to get in the mood.

I wake up this morning, then, to discover that my bookshelves are empty. I open my journals; the pages are blank. It's all been erased. What a disappearing act! Where the hell am I? God forbid I sustain a head injury. Total amnesia. Without the record, the void surrounding memory is like quicksand. I'm sinking in the sands of time, until my mouth and lungs are filled. I'm breathing my element.

It's all gone, then. Pre-history at the dawn of the technological age. Some academic lunatics are still arguing, as if their jobs depended on it. But since the university stacks were emptied, they've lost a lot of credibility. Do any of the things they're lecturing about even exist? But something remains. Students are still sitting at desks, professors are declaiming at the front of the room. It's like form without content. And it just keeps going.

So, passports, registrars, databases, libraries – all blank. The bureaucrats are losing their shit. Nobody knows how many semesters I've studied. Diplomas in dentists' offices across the country have disappeared. If you show up in front of a big building wearing a suit, you're part of the corporation. We're all nameless now. Just act like a boss. Walk the walk, talk the talk.

I take it the electron sea hasn't stopped marching, so I connect to the Internet. How can I explain this? An empty space where only logic hints at the bounds of a physical universe, the mind emptied to perfection.

In other news, there's no map to resolve international territorial disputes. Just border guards smoking cigarettes at their stations. Unknown streets have practically vanished from the face of the earth. No signage. Bells are ringing from a tower above some park.

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It's as if the world appeared from nothing today: Elon Musk, the atom bomb, and the bikini. You want to know more? You'd better act fast. Old people are dying. They're the only ones who remember.

I have to get outside, find someone who remembers me. Before it's too late.

I run into the street, am blinded by the eternal sun. I see a friend at the corner. He recognizes me. I remember Estlin! He's a physicist. And here we are... in the street. It's 6 o' clock. Rush hour! These chickens with their heads cut off sure know what they're doing. They're acting, that is, as if nothing had happened – as if they still had heads, credentials, as if the stock market hadn't evaporated, as if they'd descended from slaves or emperors. What's this glue holding the world together?

Estlin is a dancer. And a physicist! Last summer, somehow he ended up painstakingly simulating idealized love on the cold, hard floor of a museum atrium. For hours and hours, he coupled with his woman, all but genitals, morphing his body into representations of erotic artworks, smooching and humping, until his knees were bruised and his lips were cracked. (I got dragged into it, he thinks. The girl wanted to advance her career).

So, at this point in time, me, Estlin and the other cultured folk are the only humans on the face of the planet who know someone named Courbet existed. We're standing there bewildered, trying to grasp the loss, flinging the emptiness out of our arms. In a certain way, it's all the same, for Estlin understands atoms. The objective stuff. We're still surrounded by physical objects. Objects are massive, and masses are universal.

How did I get mixed up in this? Eight years ago I was combing the beach, looking for my lover. She was a dancer. According to Sehgal, part of his work was already in her body. What a way to get involved in the future unfolding! She said, we'll close our eyes and find each other in the surging expanse. With that, she departed to some far end of the shore.

It went like this. If light were like cool wind blowing, softly whipping and fluttering, as warm light diffusely flickers in the veiled space behind closed eyelids; it was

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like that when I sought you on the beach, in the warm blackness, softly whistling for you in a space that surged with waves' crashing.

But it's all a figment of the imagination. Venice beach, sand and water; the Guggenheim, objects inside a big object; the 18th century, give me proof! Love, what's that? Artists, degenerate *homo sapiens*. Life? Ah, yes, those molecules bumping up against each other. In this era, objectivity is king. Getting down to the real, an act of heroism. You've got to separate the subjective from the *real*. Because you've been making it all up. That is, until now. Time to get down to rock hard reality. Drain off subjectivity into a solipsistic madhouse with no purchasing power. The economy? A well-functioning collective delusion. Religion? Coupled with behavior, the definition of insanity. Me? Who knows...

Yes, the subject has attempted to erase itself from the world, in the name of objectivity. The subject has erased almost everything, except for the big damn eraser that it is. Erasure. The remove of all traces. Oblivion. In the name of Truth. A strange martyrdom. Perhaps we haven't kicked the habit.

Tino Sehgal, what was I looking for on that beach? She's fading, like everything else. Who was she? When we were together, there was no way around her.

Walking into your situation, I had the same feeling. There was no way around it. The pillars in the museum were like history standing its ground. We were all there, no matter what I did.

In an interview, you mentioned falling to your knees. You didn't mean religion. Just kneel. When you go home, kneel. See what it feels like. You feel different. That's all.

In all this erasing, I sense a secret. Have we made it back to the source? Being together. The meaning it was impossible to get rid of, no matter how hard we tried. Good job gathering the world, Sehgal, and making a buck off it, too.

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Entrance

The mellifluous voices reverberating in Martin-Gropius-Bau usher visitors into the contemporary art exhibition, where things exceed, and thus become, what they are. Here they'll win the presence that reveals.

The stone interior of the building is cool, like a cathedral. Sehgal's interpreters are sitting, standing, and kneeling in organic configurations in the wide, open space. Their undulating bodies change positions slowly, revolving around the axis of this constructed situation. The interpreters are singing. Their bare voices enhance the meditative aura radiating from a center located nowhere. People gather and listen at the circumference of its presence. What draws here does so with the force of primitive ceremony.

The voices can be heard everywhere in the building, like tracers of an ethereal medium that is the place undivided, the way it will be remembered. The singers chant and hum, create rhythm with the percussive capacities of the body. Like the faint memory of a decade, impressions of pop music are heard. The chorus's song coalesces and dilates, shifts with the synchronicity of avian flocks.

Visitors enter this situation through the glass doors next to the ticket counter. Who are they? Contemporaries of the exhibition: city dwellers with the curated appearances of individuals. They play their roles at the counter, buy tickets and in conformance with a preordained exchange with the museum guard gain admission. It's a kind of retrospective: a gathering of the past to present it. Tino Sehgal's works are on display here.

It would be wrong, however, to characterize these works as being on display: that is, as things to be looked at, although they can also be seen. They do not have boundaries in that way. Like human beings and words, they have a life of their own after conception, leaving their origins without forgetting them.

For its duration, what takes place here continues: time does not stop, nothing allows itself to be observed from nowhere. In the situation, not being there is impossible.

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Sehgal constructs situations that amplify subjectivity. Every human situation, from the most unique and fleeting, forms meaning outward and inward, like a node or convergence in a network of temporal relations that exist in the tension between the general and the particular: the exhibition and this exhibition; a person and this person; the situation and this situation.

Sehgal's work is immaterial. Unlike unearthed physical artifacts that, no matter how mute, always have substance – perhaps only as abiding carbon-dated objects of mysterious origin – Sehgal's works are nothing *in themselves*. This is because they don't exist in themselves. His works are of people and the larger world which animates them. In this sense, his works can never be alone.

We could say that Sehgal's works are 'pure' subjectivity. Here this means that, in the end, there is nothing to analyze *objectively*: layers of 'cultural' meaning cannot be removed as, say, a misshapen rock is revealed as the objective matter 'beneath' a primitive mixing bowl. There is nothing *underneath* Sehgal's work. At any given historical moment it is itself – *or it doesn't exist at all*.

One could think of Sehgal's works as concretized subjectivity. The formulation is vague enough. The densest – most stable, yet fleeting – moment of this 'concretization of subjectivity' is the actualization of the works within institutions. When the works are not actualized, they exist somewhere in the 'background' – like most human things that aren't present.

The written word especially pretends its non-situational, eternal meaning. The truth is, however, that the written word is hieratic or meaningless. It must be immersed in a sea of subjectivity to be reconstituted; in turn we are immersed in the words. In contrast to the written word, the present word's meaning is so present, *so* obvious, that subjectivity hides behind it (but to really *see* the subjectivity 'behind' it would be to disappear in the moment of that seeing).

Sehgal's pieces can 'be the future' in a way that objects can't, because the ground of their existence is absolutely limited to the present. (They are thus able to do something that objects can never do: they can change and still remain themselves.) They must persist through time *as themselves* and not as representations.

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Sehgal's work is not a moment *captured* in a medium, like a fossil or photograph. Instead, the work's medium *is* the stuff of moments. The curator's crisis is that of conserving something as mutable as culture, as ghostly as the meaning of a word.

The prohibition against photography is not to limit representations of the work. Rather it is to ensure that the work remains what it is, because making pictures turns Sehgal's work into what it is not: an object.

Sehgal's medium is the situation. The situation is inside people and they are inside the situation. At the exhibition, people are the medium *of the medium* of Sehgal's work – the institution that remembers and structures, the people who are capable of understanding or not understanding their own experience, the cultural sphere that lends significance.

What's especially new here? It's common ground is surely that which is most primitive and basic: cultural forms and rituals – human interaction according to rules, traditions, habits, tendencies, practices, and histories. Everything that cannot be seen or touched *except* as this situation.

What is, for example, a wedding without its situation: perhaps cloth, *Homo sapiens*, noise and carbohydrates. Nevertheless, these mere objects have not yet been entirely stripped of themselves: they have only been led back to different or more general situations. We are not familiar with nothing. There is no lack of situation outside of which the present is empty and we do not exist.

The wedding is a spontaneous gathering of all that is attendant: individuals, practices and the traditions that define them. What ritual could be more conventional, what words more scripted? At the same time, it would be odd to say that individuals don't take part in weddings – or that weddings exist independently of people. Always the same yet somehow different, the ceremony only exists in its being kept in the present.

In the same way, Tino Sehgal's works only *are* in the presence of people in the context of an exhibition. Existing in time, like tradition, and foregoing materiality, they have bound themselves to the ground of meaning and intend to remain with us for as long as that meaning endures or is capable of changing with us. Who knows what the future may bring.

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Children of the Future

Ann Lee (2007): We are transfixed by the gaze of a fragile yet sovereign child. Calmly pacing the wooden floor, curtains drawn back from the windows behind her, she considers her visitors. Mellow pools of natural light illuminate the room. Her movements are slow and sedate, as if she were suspended somewhere between abstraction and reality. People gather in a semicircle, some sitting on the wooden floor at her feet.

She speaks with a patience familiar with great distances, as if she had travelled across the universe only to find herself here again, in this uncanny world where she was created.

She tells of her origins in an artistic project: “Two artists wanted me to own myself... a sign owning itself, having the rights to itself, kind of strange, but generous, I guess.” If you haven’t heard of the project, it doesn’t matter – she’s here *now* and: “it’s just past.”

“Where are you from?” she asks.

“Berlin”

“Yes, me too, in 2003. In a place called Kreuzberg.

“After a while, I didn’t want to only own myself: drop dead in a legal framework. I’ll never forget. I wanted to be important. I decided to ask Tino if he could help me with that. I finally wanted to communicate with you.”

“So, how are you? Really nice to meet you,” she says, facing her visitors. Ann Lee inspires a breathtaking hesitation. People don’t seem to know who they’re talking to. Does the child reciting these words understand what she is saying? Her artificiality is unsettling because her presence is real. How should one interact with a being who is, at bottom, a gathering signs?

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The child remains Ann Lee, and Ann Lee remains the child. We vacillate so rapidly between addressing a child and addressing someone else, that we are enthralled in stasis.

Certainly the greater part of our lives only makes sense through playing roles: being a child, being a stranger. Our actions and words exist in their being repeated countless times. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a time when we are not encompassed by a role that lends sense to our actions. A kindergarten teacher becomes ill and is replaced by another one. The possibility of being a ‘teacher’ depends on this possibility of replacement. From announcing the newborn to mourning the dead, we speak interpretations of scripts and act in accordance with conventions. Anything outside of this is *nonsense*.

Yet individuals must be more than their roles. At this point we’d like to assert ourselves and say: individuals ought to be unpredictable. Indeed, every person is a new beginning. One thinks of children and the caregivers who introduce them to the world, bringing them into the historical situation whose words they will speak to become who they are.

According to this discussion, something essential to an individual is *other* than her roles. To know this person means to get in touch with her *otherness*. Yet how can I get in touch with something I do not know? (For I am more or less familiar with the roles). Perhaps in opening myself to what I cannot understand, I will come closer: the other is to be found at the *borders of sense*.

Ann Lee’s presence is otherworldly yet familiar. When you look into her eyes, she gazes back at you: the living presence of a subjectivity that transcends the individual but only finds expression through her. Now we are certain that the artist is speaking to us through her, that the world in which the artist made her is speaking to us through her, and that we consequently are speaking to us through her.

“Now that I’m an individual, I’ve started meeting people who are tired of being an individual. They seem tired, very tired, of having all these decisions to make. Recently I heard that some people, especially in big cities, are tired of having to be creative. I’m

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not sure I understand. I'm probably too young an individual. Could you explain it to me?"

The eyes of Ann Lee, a being on the precipice of individuality – a young girl not yet acquainted with the ways of the world – are disquieting and poignant. If the child does not understand these words, they are still part of her, and perhaps she will understand them some day.

She looks around the room, waiting for an answer. Indeed, what to do with these individuals who have developed a self-reflexive relationship to the situations that contain them? There is a radical potential here that when not cared for will have to give way to the normative – a kind of nowhere and everywhere – which, because of the instability of this reflexivity, would like to interpret everything: globalization as interpreting everything in the same way. ("Would you rather be too busy or not busy enough," she asks thoughtfully.)

Ann Lee is a rupture and a coming together. There is something estranging about the familiarity that she offers so freely. As an artwork, and an act of consciousness, she must be more familiar with us than we are with ourselves and need not ask the questions.

She was bored at the artist's house – Tino is always on the phone these days – and a baby started pulling books from the shelf: "and as one fell down, it opened to a page and I read what it said: 'Thus we ask now, even if the old rootedness is being lost in this age, may not a new plan and foundation be created again, a foundation and ground out of which humans, nature, and all their works can flourish in a new way, even in the technological age?'"

I looked at it, I gazed at it, and it hit me – it really hit me. But I don't know what it means. Do you know what it means? Could you explain it to me?"

A gathering of our selves in persona – a child of the world to come – she questions us about the future.

She begins to walk toward the door. "Anyway, I've been having a good time with you. Let me ask you one last question: What is the relation between a sign and melancholia?"

Wistfully she departs: the sign longs to speak to us.

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Life Coming to Presence

Perhaps one relationship between a sign and melancholia is that the sign, as that through which we recognize ourselves, is also the possibility of being closed off from ourselves: from the source. The sign becomes independent, forgetting its origin and claiming authority over what is and what shall be. Every sign strives for law and eternity. To witness this present, we must limit it with words and representations. There is something we cannot comprehend. In realizing ourselves, it was as if, through this limit, we pronounced our own end.

Happening in time, it is ordinary that creation be informed by the past. In **Kiss** (2006) a couple painstakingly enact a ceaseless amatory embrace on the exhibition floor. Morphing in slow-motion between historical artistic representations of the kiss, the interpreters embody the erotic,

Historically, artists speak of the study of Nature: revelation as art from life. Here, however, the reverse happens: the living subject, in a kind of turning into itself, follows in time-lapse what first entered the world through artistic medium. The couple apparently re-presents, among others, works by Rodin, Courbet, and from Jeff Koon. When these works came out of life into the midst of the public, it was questioned whether they ought to be *seen*. What terrible power lies hidden here, that it must be prevented from seeing itself?

Pornography has been defined, against art, as that which stimulates the sexual instinct. Like life, lust is a kind of blindness that negates the individual in its indiscriminate longing. Yet these distinctions only demonstrate that consciousness has already separated itself in the immemorial struggle between body and spirit.

The erotic is not merely the mediation of sex which in its near a-historical sameness never knows change or variation. The erotic diversity that animates the world is sex in time or sex entering history. In order to become more than itself, life had to

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become desire. In desiring something beyond itself, life began to *exist*. Differentiated and enduring into a future that sustains its evolution, it is part of history.

It is not an accident that erotic experience remains a gateway to its origin: the small death that, through the window of time, is a glimpse of eternity: or the eternal sleep of life that forever awaits someone's awakening. At the outermost and innermost extremes of the erotic embrace, what is between us – and thus we – dissolve.

To think about it in another way. The embracing lovers want each other and so begin at their difference. In longing for something outside their own boundaries, the individuals perceive each other as wholes apart: the object is born as the source of the subject. There was a time, a long time ago, when one was one. There was nothing to see. Desire is a way of 'seeing' because to see, at first, one must be one's separate self. Thus what is *between* the lovers – they are a world apart – was the condition for their longing to return.

If 'love' has been mistaken – as the most concentrated form of our culture's narcissistic fixations – it is because when it looked into the eyes of the other it saw *nothing but itself*. It was able to recognize itself in the other, but unable to recognize *the other in itself*. This 'other' is the selfsame unknown, at the beginning and end of sense, out of which art and the individual make themselves *known*.

The Darkness of Meaning

If art has had any meaning, it has been 'subjective': it is nowhere to be seen.

Vision is perhaps the most difficult way to get in touch with the relational continuity of the 'subjective.' No other human experiential modality so definitely connects us to and isolates us from the world. It is probably through optical illusion that the child is first deceived by the senses and so becomes aware of their unreliability – an experience that simultaneously establishes the 'subjectivity' of perception and the 'objectivity' of the external world: culminating in the Cartesian trauma that philosophy is still recovering from. This is particularly modern and quite justifiably 'scientific.' Yet

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from this perspective, it is very difficult to awaken a subjectivity that doesn't either focus too much on the objectivity of the object, on the one hand, or fall into subjective solipsism, on the other – that is, it is difficult to awaken a subjectivity that realizes its own relationality.

At Martin-Gropius-Bau, Sehgal asks us to look at something we cannot see. In a separate room devoid of light, something is happening in the dark. The exhibition-goers cannot see each other: they are the invisible crowd that is always present. As the eyes adjust, glimmering shapes begin to disrupt the plenitude of darkness: impressions on the retina so faint, it is unclear whether they originate inside or outside the self. The nearly invisible forms vacillate in the dark with a peculiar instability between what they could be, always at risk of becoming nothing again. Gradually a ghostly mass continues to be there and so establishes itself: the pale skin of two naked individuals in their slow, erotic dance: a variation of **Kiss**.

The invisible thing that one is meant to see in the exhibition is the meaning of the work. The meaning of the work is neither inherent in the object nor in the subject – it is between them, in the situation. Without vision – the primary experience of physical objectivity – the subject's contribution is emphasized. In the darkness the questions “what is the work?” and “what is the meaning of the work?” become the same. Nothing is seen until it becomes something. If anything ‘is’ it must already have a ‘meaning.’

Original Worship

In the celebratory time of **This Variation** (????) a swarm of voices create the contagious atmosphere of a dance party using nothing but the potential of the embodied and situated subject: the capacity to interpret the past, share a mood, and the body's ability to sing, dance and make noise.

To enter the darkness is to leave oneself behind: to be anyone.

A rushing return to the power beneath an ossified order. Partly freed to participate immediately. There is anonymity in the dark, and hence an ecstatic release from the

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responsibilities of being someone: but who could take responsibility for the entire situation, anyway?

Those who are *less sure of themselves* are encouraged by a caring hand. Anyone's hand reaches out of the absolute darkness, and takes yours, bringing you as surely, steadily, as all the hands that brought you into all communal experience: we are here together, I understand you, as I would understand anyone else – come, be with *us, be us (as part of us always is you)*.

Singing is not our own. The songs we sing are not our own. We don't belong to ourselves.

In the 'modern' world man became the absolute center through an intellectual faculty whose intrinsic objectivity made a claim to the way things had always been. Rationality and the ability to represent placed man above all, even as his knowledge displaced him into a universe of stars. His force on earth, dominating the entire intricate landscape that led to his genesis.

Rationality – in doing so, in securing itself, a final definition of what it was, it also lost itself to the 'external' world, no longer knowing how to get back to a place it was shut out of, expelled from, in this very act of understanding itself. Cutting itself off, it attempted to build everything back up from this nowhere. But it is clear that the individual came out of the world.

Everything was reduced, led back to, the individual, and intellectually the task was to build the world back up together around it: societies became contracts, the world became in itself a mess of nonsense only to be reconstituted in the mind.

Kneeling in this sense is to kneel before the greater, is kneeling before no one, and making oneself humble before no one in particular from which one became someone.

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In the piece, the singer kneels before the dancer, and takes care of that dancer: providing the situation for the dancer to be herself. In her being herself, the music in turn finds a place in the world.

The gathering (of people) in the atrium was the potential which made this historical happening possible. The world of art – as inquiry and communication – exists among us.

In Sehgal's work the mind is drawn back to the origin of us in everyone and no one. It provides relief to the self that has lost its way, while celebrating the individual within its context.

– while those who have looked into their own eyes and discovered there a radical contingency – this dependence

Those who looked into their own eyes and saw a dependent origination, a contingency – we saw the situation and found too many to thank –

One is born into the world, does not know everything through reading books in the library. Can contemporary art be a place for encountering ourselves, seeing without losing sight?

Can art be a new place to know each other?

To do more than pass the time, or if that is all that's left to us, for us – then to pass it well.

The act of kneeling before something greater or unknown. That kneeling has been modesty.

The dancer dances to the music of the other and harbors the music making it exist.