



Through 'the Keyhole' utopia

Tino Sehgal's art installation *This Progress* offered something rare: a space where participating academics could converse without goals in mind. Rachel Adams on a precious experience

When acclaimed architect Richard Meier designed the Aye Simon Reading Room at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, he probably never imagined it like this. The room is cluttered and smells strongly of food. Tables are strewn with paper cups, newspapers and takeaway containers. Coats and bags are piled high along the shelves. A baby rolls on a blanket spread on the floor. Another dozes in a pram. People lounge on the elegant, understated wood furniture, eating, writing on laptops, marking papers, reading or talking animatedly to one another. A man reclines in the curve of the elegant, keyhole-shaped doorway, typing on his BlackBerry.

This is where the "art" went to relax during the six-week run of *This Progress*, the much-talked-about show by 34-year-old London-based artist Tino Sehgal – a piece that consisted entirely of conversations between museum visitors and a cadre of trained "interpreters". And for many of the graduate students and academics who served as interpreters, this room – which we affectionately dubbed "the Keyhole" – became a temporary utopia. It was a retreat from the status hierarchies, the shop talk and the petty disagreements found in more official academic settings. It was also a place where thoughtful, informed conversation flourished across the boundaries of rank and discipline.

"I'm absolutely in love with everyone in the group," enthused one of the interpreters in the glow of the morning after the show had closed. "I've had this with seminars. When classes work, it's like a love affair. It ends quickly enough that you never really have to stop being your best self."

When Sehgal created *This Progress*, whose Guggenheim run ended on 10 March, he may not have imagined that he would also create a community. But then again, perhaps he knew exactly what he was doing.

You could say that Sehgal likes to be in control. His art involves no objects, and he does not allow it to be documented in any way. For his show, the Guggenheim's spiral gallery was stripped bare for the first time in its 50-year history. There were no press releases, no brochures, no audio tours and no wall placards. When Sehgal sells his work (and he is unabashed about his participation in the marketplace), all transactions must be conducted verbally. He and his family travelled to the US by boat, since he refuses to fly.

At the same time, his art succeeds because he is willing to let it go. Sehgal was almost always present during museum hours, wearing his trademark jeans and black sweater, but he rarely intervened. His pieces – which he calls "staged situations" – involve only minimal choreography and scripting. *This Progress* relies on the intimacy of

spontaneous and unrecorded conversations between visitors and interpreters.

Sehgal and his staff spent months carefully selecting the show's multigenerational cast of interpreters. In rehearsal, we were told where to stand on the ramps that lead upward through the gallery and where to walk at what pace; when to appear before museum visitors and when to disappear. At specified moments in the piece, the interpreters were instructed to deliver lines that would prompt discussion loosely based around the theme of progress.

We were also asked to obey certain ground rules: no T-shirts with words or logos; avoid conversations about art and art museums (too much like navel-gazing); approach visitors with a statement rather than a question; don't lecture; and don't allow the conversation to devolve into small talk.

Interpreters were managed in other, less explicit ways. Some weeks into the piece, I asked Louise Höjer – one of Sehgal's assistants – how many of us there were. She demurred. It turned out that her refusal, like so much about *This Progress*, was deliberate. Sehgal had decided not to reveal our numbers until after the piece closed, reasoning that the participants would feel closer to the piece and one another if they perceived themselves to be part of a smaller group. He and his staff knew each of the 300 or so interpreters by name before the piece opened. There was no roster and no Facebook page, minimising the chance for us to profile one another and reproduce the hierarchies of the world outside the museum.

Within these boundaries, interpreters were free to shape their encounters with museum visitors. And backstage, we could do whatever we liked. The strongest camaraderie developed among the Younger Adults (a flattering name for those of us aged 30-59), who occupied the Keyhole when not working the ramps.

A philosophy professor who told me about her struggle with coeliac disease would eat elaborately prepared gluten-free meals in between her conversations. One pair played a game of *Go* that lasted the duration of the piece. Some would read the paper. Some took notes about their conversations. Some played with Sehgal's two-year-old son, which one day involved skateboarding lessons. But most of us took a break from talking to museum visitors by talking to one another.

Many found that the conversations in the Keyhole were the most meaningful aspect of the piece. For the academics among us, this kind of dialogue represented what we love best about our work, without the power struggles, the tedium and the squabbling that is an inevitable part of our professional lives. David Schleifer, a graduate student in sociology at New York University,



Making a statement interpreters were instructed to talk to museum visitors to prompt discussion

found that backstage he felt “licensed to talk about what we do but not for networking, scoring points, or always asking ‘who do you know?’ For me it was just this platonic ideal of scholarly interaction with no goals in mind.”

He adds: “One day I was coming from the university library and I saw a fire truck with a number 5 on it and I thought there might be a poem or a painting with that number 5. So I went to the museum and I just said to two people: ‘I saw this fire truck.’ And they said: ‘Oh yeah, the William Carlos Williams poem. And there’s the painting by Charles Demuth.’”

“Although the point of the piece was what was happening on the ramps, the most intense experience of it for me was the interaction with the other people in the back room.”

Hillary Chute, who commuted from postdoctoral work at the Harvard Society of Fellows for her weekly shifts, thought the piece inspired a special kind of conversation among its participants.

“The community of people working in the Keyhole room was the best part, absolutely. There was a kind of talking going on that I deeply value. People established intimacy quickly through the shared circumstance of being in the piece, and skipped over the niceties and status-gauging,” she says.

“It’s not quite the kind of talk you may have with close friends or colleagues. It was a combination of the best parts of each – affectionate, engaged and attentive.”

These interactions took their form and substance from the interactions with museum visitors. A number of interviewees perceived an intriguing synchronicity between the brief, fragmented and at times surprisingly intimate conversations they had with the public and with one another.

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Talk show engaging conversations were the aim

Nermeen Shaikh, a Younger Adult, remarks: “The conversations we had in the Keyhole were often about the conversations we had with the visitors. In this sense, they often ran parallel to one another.”

For Lynn Festa, associate professor of English at Rutgers University, the fellowship backstage energised her performance, especially after dealing with recalcitrant museum-goers.

“After the occasional bad turn, one could be buoyed up by one’s fellow interpreters. It was part of what allowed me to absorb the resistance, even at times the resentment, of some of the visitors and not feel wounded by it,” she says.

Although the closest community seems to have formed among the Younger Adults, admiring and respectful attachments spanned the generations.

“For me, one great unanticipated pleasure was interacting with the teenagers who briefed us,” remarks Laura Slatkin, a professor of Classical studies at New York University. “I was moved by their seriousness and impressed by their thoughtfulness, flexibility, independent-mindedness, unsnobbishness – by their egalitarian spirit, including towards the senior cohort.”

Adnan Agha, a first-year undergraduate at New York University, comments: “It was always great to have conversations [with the Younger Adults] because of the fact that they were all so intelligent and interesting.”

The interviewees welcomed the opportunity to interact with one another, without the constraints of age, profession and status. A full professor talked freely with teenagers who, in another context, might be her students. Graduate students talked to faculty without feeling pressure to prove themselves or show evidence that – yes – they were making progress on their dissertations. Professors talked to one another without knowing who had tenure or who might be up for promotion. They found common ground with colleagues in unfamiliar disciplines. And, perhaps even more refreshingly, they talked with other educated, thoughtful people who were not professional academics.

Not everyone gave priority to the relationships among the interpreters. Courtney Bender, associate professor of religious studies at Columbia University, felt less stimulated by her conversations backstage than with the public. “It was lovely to meet everyone,” she says. “But that isn’t what’s going to keep me up at night thinking.”

Another Younger Adult made the case more forcefully, saying that he avoided the Keyhole, entering only when he needed a drink of water. Instead, he preferred to spend his downtime watching the piece unfold. He found that his

interactions with the museum visitors were the most significant aspect of the piece. Unlike many others, he feels that *This Progress* was limited by the fact that so many of the interpreters were academics.

“Different kinds of people might have produced other kinds of connections,” he remarks. “The piece might have been less confrontational, with less lecturing, which is what people do in their teaching. Really smart but not academic people would have given the piece a different flavour, more outside of the art world.”

But for the majority, the magic of *This Progress* was not its challenge to the museum, but its temporary suspension of the disciplinary and institutional structures that govern relations among intellectuals.

More than one interpreter compared the experience to summer camp or a theatre production, where a group of people is thrown together by an intense collective project. The bittersweet end comes before resentments and infighting have a chance to emerge. Perhaps those of us who are professional academics found such connections particularly resonant because they recall the camaraderie of the collegiate life that happens around us but no longer invites us to join in.

Given all the note-taking, analysis and debate among the Younger Adults, surprisingly few said they planned to write about the piece. It is unusual for professors, who invariably describe themselves as overworked and underpaid, to make the kind of time commitment required by the piece (at least three four-hour shifts per week) without the promise of any material reward beyond a relatively inconsequential hourly wage. But many say that what was precious about their experience was its transitory nature.

“I like that it was ephemeral,” Chute says. “That feels important to me somehow, to hold it in my mind without making something more concrete or material out of it. I have no desire to write about it at all!”

In this group of people accustomed to thinking of time as a precious commodity, there was something valuable about being present without expecting to gain anything more than experience itself.

Hugh Raffles, an anthropologist at The New School for Social Research in New York, says firmly: “I definitely will not write about the piece. I have other things to do and I don’t want to. I’m happy that it was ephemeral. I have good memories. There’s no need to analyse it.” ●

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