

# IN THE ABSENCE OF DOCUMENTATION

## REMEMBERING TINO SEHGAL'S CONSTRUCTED SITUATIONS

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**ABSTRACT**

Museum practices of collecting and conservation have a long history of documenting artworks as a form of “materialised memory”. On the sale of his work, the artist Tino Sehgal (London, 1976), however, does not allow for any form of visual documentation or material traces. Instead, knowledge of how to perform his pieces is intended to travel from person to person, from body to body in the form of narratives, movements, and through rehearsals. How can this work survive in contexts that seem to be so heavily dependent on written and visual documents? What are the challenges presented by these works, and how do museums respond to these challenges? Informed by empirical research into museums’ strategies of acquiring Sehgal’s work, this essay will argue that different notions of memory are brought to the fore through these collecting and conservation practices, thereby challenging existing documentation strategies and practices of remembrance.

**KEYWORDS**

DOCUMENTATION | PERFORMANCE ART |  
COLLECTION MANAGEMENT | PRACTICES OF  
REMEMBRANCE

**RESUMO**

As práticas dos museus de colecionar e conservar têm uma longa história de documentar obras de arte como uma forma de “memória materializada”. Contudo, quando vende uma obra, o artista Tino Sehgal (Londres 1976) não permite qualquer forma de documentação visual ou vestígios materiais. Em vez disso, o conhecimento de como concretizar as suas performances deve passar de pessoa para pessoa, de corpo para corpo na forma de narrativas, movimentos e através de ensaios. Como é que este tipo de obra pode sobreviver em contextos que parecem tão dependentes de documentos escritos e visuais? Quais são os desafios que estas obras apresentam e como respondem os museus a esses desafios? Baseado em investigação empírica das estratégias utilizadas por museus na aquisição de obras de Sehgal, este artigo defende que diferentes noções de memória são convocadas por estas práticas de colecionar e conservar, desafiando as estratégias existentes de documentação e as práticas de reminiscência.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

DOCUMENTAÇÃO | ARTE DA PERFORMANCE  
| COLEÇÃO | GESTÃO | PRÁTICAS DE  
REMINISCÊNCIA

## Introduction

The documentary life of an artwork within the museum generally starts even before an artwork is accessioned into a collection. The curatorial staff will have produced a pre-acquisition form describing the work and indicating its value for the collection to convince the board of directors. Then, once the work is acquired, a new museum record is created, and the artwork receives an inventory number. The artist or his gallery sends an invoice, and the legal department follows up on the documents guiding the transfer of ownership. The conservation department produces additional records such as detailed photographs, condition reports, and scientific analysis. In the event that the contemporary artwork does not provide sufficient information to go by, an artist interview may be recorded and transcribed. When the work is exhibited, curators and technicians pull out photographs and installation instructions to guide the presentation of the work. And when the work travels, it is accompanied by the necessary documentation such as loan forms, insurance papers and condition reports. Although it is commonly acknowledged that documentation is always open to more than one interpretation, and always partial and fragmented, producing written and visual documentation of artworks is a crucial part of museum practices. Collection managers, conservators, and registrars go to great lengths to gather key information about the museum's object for future reference. While being aware that an object is always richer than its documentation and that documentation is never neutral, never sufficient, nor complete, professional standards are underpinned by a strong belief in written and visual documentation as *if* evidential, fixing, recording, noting, and holding. And, indeed, generally considered to be more reliable than oral forms of documentation. In short: An artwork's visual and written documentation as a form of *materialised* memory is considered invaluable to its perpetuation. This is the case for traditional art objects, but even more so for complex, variable, contemporary artworks such as installations, conceptual art, and performance-based artworks, which fully rely on documentation for their future existence (c.f. Buskirk 2003; Muñoz Viñas 2004; Kraemer 2007; Hummelen and Scholte 2006).<sup>1</sup>

But what if these records and documentation procedures are taken away? What if there are no memory holders such as artist's sketches, condition reports, curatorial records, registrar's files, artist's interview recordings, installation guidelines, or images to fall back on? Are museums, as custodians of our cultural memory, completely dependent on visual and written documentation strategies for their collection care, or do other forms of remembrance also play a role? To address these questions, I will examine how the recent acquisition and conservation of Tino Sehgal's (London, 1976) artworks perpetuate in a museum context. Sehgal's artistic practice is particularly interesting, as he objects to visual documentation and material traces, thereby challenging museums not only to re-think common notions of documentation and practices of remembrance, but also to act accordingly. What is needed for his works to endure in this specific institutional context?

While a lot has been written on the reception of Sehgal's works and unorthodox artistic strategies, there is almost no literature to be found on the actual consequences of the ban on documentation for the museum as a collecting institution.<sup>2</sup> How can this work survive in contexts that seem to be so heavily dependent on written and visual documents? Will, as curator and art critic Claire Bishop suggests, "oral conservation eat the works into oblivion?" (Bishop 2005). Or will museums be able to develop sustainable remembrance procedures while still accommodating the artist's carefully constructed mandates?

In order to answer these questions, I will first take a closer look at Tino Sehgal's art practice and explore the reasoning behind the prohibiting of documentation. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of a variety of museums' attempts to keep the memory of Sehgal's works alive in order to be able to re-perform them in the future. The analysis is based on empirical studies conducted between 2008-2012 at several European and American museums that have acquired Sehgal's pieces for their

collection.<sup>3</sup> Through cross-organisational comparison, the article points towards the tensions that arise from the difference between the way museums deal with memory by way of (written) documentation, and the way Sehgal deals with it.

### **On the prohibition of documentation**

Tino Sehgal's "constructed situations" or "living sculptures," as he tends to refer to his works, thereby avoiding the term "performance," break with the most fundamental convention of the visual arts: the material object. Instead of a material object, his works consist of words and songs, choreographed movements, or a conversation with a museum visitor: "A situation between two people" (Von Hantelmann 2010, 132). His pieces are live encounters, often executed by museum attendants, or hired actors or dancers, carrying out instructions conceived by the artist and learned through rehearsals.

Sehgal studied political economy and dance in Berlin and Essen and began to work as an artist in 2000. Before entering the visual art world, he became known for productions with choreographers Christine De Smedt and Xavier Le Roy, and artist Jérôme Bel. Works such as *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000), *Kiss* (2003), and *This is so contemporary* (2005) evolve around movements and draw heavily on his choreographic background. Others are more politically oriented and based on conversations or singing, addressing topics such as propaganda (*This is Propaganda*, 2002), market economy (*This is Exchange*, 2002), or the meaning of progress (*This Progress*, 2010). In *These Associations* (2012), executed in Tate's Turbine Hall, movement, conversation, and singing came together in a piece involving several hundred interpreters over a period of several weeks.

What particularly sets Sehgal's work apart from other artistic practices is the rigorousness of his restriction on the production of all forms of documentation concerning his work.<sup>4</sup> Instead, knowledge of how to perform his pieces is intended to travel from person to person, from body to body in the form of narratives, movements, and through rehearsals. On the sale of his work, the artist stipulates that there is no written set of instructions, no written receipt, no wall labels, no catalogue, and no pictures. Ownership entails the right to (re)present the work. Sale is done by conversation and by a handshake, and instead of a contract, the residue of the acquisition meeting is a narrative, or rather a set of narratives of those present at the meeting.

The specific conditions set by Sehgal allow his situations to function *as if* they are objects. Rather than a one-time performance, many of his works are intended to be structurally repeatable and have to be on par with the ordinary length of an exhibition display. As his works always come in a limited edition, it is also in that sense that his practice copies the strategies of material artworks in order for them to apply to the workings of the art market and collectors. In the words of Dorothea von Hantelmann: "As art Sehgal's works fulfil all of the parameters of a visual artwork except an essential one, its inanimate materiality. While James Coleman and [Daniel] Buren start from an object, which they lend an event-like quality, Sehgal starts from an ephemeral event, like singing, moving, or speaking, lending it an object-like quality." (Von Hantelmann 2010, 130-131)

Sehgal frames his practice of producing ephemeral events as a critique on the mode of production that comes with material object:

**It struck me as a very interesting thing to rethink how economics could work, and I thought that the mode of production that is inherent to dance is an interesting model for this. While visual art proposes that we can extract material from natural resources to then transform it and have a product that is there to endure, dance transforms actions to obtain a product or artwork and produces and deproduces this product at the same time. (quoted in Obrist 2010, 827)**

Elsewhere Sehgal argues:

**I don't make photographic or filmic reproductions of my work, because it exists as a situation, and therefore substituting it with some material object like a photo or video doesn't seem like an adequate documentation. Also, my works take a form that exists over time — as they can be shown over and over again — so they're not dependent on any kind of documentation to stand in for them. (quoted in Griffin 2005, 2)**

In other interviews he has also stressed the importance of oral culture as a form of remembrance: "(...) it is really important for me to recall that our oral culture of remembrance is still the most powerful instance of knowledge transfer in our society today" (quoted in Moehrke 2011, 116). From this perspective, the artist seems to concur with the classical discourse in performance studies where documentation is presented as a threat appropriating the live event. The rhetoric is one of a well-known dichotomy: his "situations" — like dance works — persist through the body and through oral representation, and are therefore "naturally" subject to change, and opposed to the permanence of the material object.<sup>5</sup> In this view, documentation via images may undesirably fix the work or become a substitute for the work.

Besides an alternative production mode, Sehgal's prohibition thus also induces a claim for another knowledge culture: one that relies on living memory rather than documentation. With his ban on the production of written and visual documentation, and the emphasis on oral and bodily forms of memory, his practice seems to evoke the traditional duality of documentation (archive) and other forms of transmission, such as through dance and oral transfer (repertoire).<sup>6</sup> Yet, by bringing a *supposedly* very different mode of transfer into the visual art domain, by injecting one institutional practice (dance) into another (fine arts), his work draws attention to notions such as embodied knowledge and oral history that are commonly overlooked in museum practice because of its emphasis on visual and written documentation forms. Although these traditions of transfer seem to stand miles apart from museum practices of documentation, they are arguably also part of common museum conservation strategies. Sehgal's works make visible a knowledge culture that is already existent in museums, but hardly addressed due to the persistent orientation on producing physical records. Writing about the conservation of Sehgal's work *This is Propaganda* (2002), Pip Laurenson, head of Collection Care Research at Tate observes, "Being prohibited from documenting the installation was difficult; however it caused us to reflect on the limitations of even the best documentation and the role of memory in the museum. (...)" (Laurenson 2007, 30).

### **Strategies of remembrance**

Conservators, curators, and registrars alike stressed the "unnatural" and unsettling situation in which they found themselves trying to comply with the artist's wishes by not falling back on paper as memory aid. A registrar who had an active role in the processing of the acquisition at MoMA, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, explains: "We do have some documentation though. We were not permitted to take notes of the performance during the meeting, but we were permitted to draft notes which relate to the administration of the work such as for keeping track of interpreters, documenting the preparation time prior to installation, costs and so on."<sup>7</sup>

Despite the ban on documentation, outside the museum, Sehgal's works — perhaps more than any material artwork — evoke an ever-growing body of visual and written documentation. A search online reveals an enormous production of clandestine pictures and videos taken during exhibitions. Besides photos and videos, blogs and articles comprising witness reports from members of the audience, as well as from interpreters, all express a desire to share something of their experiences with the works. As far as is known, this "unauthorized" and "user-generated" visual documentation created by visitors is not yet taken into account or archived by the museums. One of the

reasons being that it is considered to be material produced against the artist's wishes. In addition, it may be the case that this material created by visitors is not considered to be documentation of the artwork but rather responses, interpretations and comments on the work. Presumably, in time, these "folksonomies" will gain in importance and may even provide a foundation for museums to base future re-iterations on when the artist or his producers are no longer available. As present, however the material produced by visitors are generally not considered to be documentation of the performance, which is in need of archiving. Or, as Mary Richards observes, at present, "No material evidence of Sehgal's work officially exists" (2012, 72).

Compared to other collection documentation files, the Tino Sehgal files at the diverse museums are indeed remarkably thin. Usually they contain a copy of Sehgal's curriculum vitae; a selection of reviews; correspondence between the gallery, the conservator, the curator, the artist, and legal advisors. In some cases, documentation related to the production process is included containing the names of the interpreters, and the names of the staff members responsible for the realisation of the piece.<sup>8</sup>

At Tate, hardly any records of the first and still only enactment of *This is Propaganda* (2002) at Tate Britain remain. Even a list of the names and contacts of the interpreters was missing from the file. However, as Sehgal stipulates that his performers get paid, eventually their contacts could be retrieved through the HR department. It is presently understood that perhaps staff members may document information that is necessary for the work's production — but not the actual performance — which shows how, like in the case of MoMA, a distinction is made between documentation related to the administration of the work and documentation of the work. It also demonstrates that in the process of transfer, what is meant by documentation and what the rules of engagement are, is not always clear.

The method of transfer is described as "teaching", where the artist or one of his producers instructs museum staff how to produce the piece. It means that the curator or conservator, based on the directions of the artist, has to choose a space, learn how to audition the "interpreters", and learn how to teach them their parts.<sup>9</sup> In theory, this mode of operation — delegating the responsibilities to one person in the museum (often the curator in charge of the production of the first enactment in the museum), who then realizes the piece — would imply that the artist is no longer needed as a conveyor of the work. In practice, however, the liaison between artist and the work is robust, as museums display less confidence to re-perform the works without the involvement of the artist, one of his producers, or earlier dancers.

In preparation for the re-performance of *Kiss* in March 2010 at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), the artist was consulted by phone. A common practice is to re-invite the previous interpreters, as was also the case at AGO, where the piece was re-performed by the same dancers from the initial performance, in consultation with a dancer who had performed the piece elsewhere (Giguère 2012, 327).<sup>10</sup> Memory of the work becomes dispersed, and is no longer contained or controlled by the museum. By editioning the work, the more people in and outside the museum organization learn to enact it and the more chance it has to survive. In the case of a work like *Kiss* (sold in an edition of three), with shifts lasting up to three hours before a new couple takes over, this means that, over the years, hundreds of interpreters have enacted the piece.

Sehgal's work thus depends heavily on the interpreters of his work, but they are mostly not employed by the museum. His practice thus seems to rely on institutional memory (information held in the memories of museum staff members) as well as a specific form of collective memory (namely dispersed beyond the museum organisation). Its perpetuation depends upon the mode of memorization as *distributed* memory.<sup>11</sup> Rather than accommodating traditional strategies of containment, such as in-house documentation and centralization of archives, museums acquiring his works are challenged to encourage and foster distributed memory as a means of circumventing memory loss.

The activity of remembrance of the work will most likely only be prompted in the event of a re-performance. For several museums, this awareness led to an attempt of community building amongst the interpreters, to trace the networks, stay in touch with the interpreters, and ideally rehearse the piece once a year in order to keep the memory alive. At Tate this was referred to as a “re-fresh meeting.” The registrar at MoMA explains:

**One of the other things that I have been thinking about is: now that Tino is off doing new pieces, new works, how do we help the interpreters to maintain this memory? Because if a dancer works less, if you cannot actually dance and repeat a choreography, you will forget it. As we cannot record it, they cannot look at it and really have to remember it.<sup>12</sup>**

The registrar is not alone in stressing the responsibility of the museum in keeping alive the possibility of going back to the interpreters. Other interviewees have also argued that the solution is to re-perform the work frequently, or find other ways to encourage the interpreters to memorise the movements, the words, or the rules of the work. Tino Sehgal's practice thus brings to the fore how museums are urged to buy into these relationships and nourish the networks on which the works depends.<sup>13</sup>

Many of the above-expressed concerns speak to difficulties that are considered to be perennial problems in the shift of responsibilities when an artwork enters a collection. In the case of Sehgal's work, especially the fear of not “getting it right,” and the fear that the institutional memory will erode — and thus that the work will be forgotten — come to the fore. As we have seen, one of the implications of acquiring Sehgal's work is that the museum is forced to buy into relationships with memory holders. For the Tate, this prompted the question of whether the limits of what the museum is capable of have been reached. Re-executing *This is Propaganda* requires selecting interpreters, setting up rehearsals, giving directions as to how to perform, and keeping the interpreters engaged and focused, among other responsibilities. All this is considered to fall outside of present curatorial expertise, and requires different skills from curators and conservators, as they are dealing with the production of an event rather than an object.<sup>14</sup>

There seems, however, to be a shift in Tino Sehgal's approach towards the responsibilities that became apparent during the “remembrance meeting” organized by Tate in 2012 and involving the original interpreters of *This is Propaganda* and the artist. Initially, museum staff members were to become the work's keepers and authorized installers, but recently Sehgal seems to have shifted this responsibility to his producers — a strategy that is not uncommon for museum works that require some degree of performativity (Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014). For *This progress*, a work acquired by the Guggenheim, there are now three officially recognized “installers” (thereby taking it out of the hands of museum staff): Sehgal, and his immediate co-workers Asad Raza and Louise Höjer. These are, according to Mary Richards, “recognized repositories” of the work who “are contractually obliged, at an appropriate moment, to pass their knowledge of the work on to someone younger than themselves (...)” (Richards 2012, 76). While museum staff members were appointed as keepers of the work in most of the previous acquisition cases, practice shows that, despite the model of dispersed memory, especially with the more complex works, the artist maintains his engagement in the works' perpetuation, even if he is no longer the owner.

## Conclusion

This essay pointed towards the unsettling nature of non-documented artworks in respect to standard processes and systems of museum care. It looked at the difference between the way museums deal with memory by way of (written) documentation, and the way Sehgal's artistic practice challenges these procedures. Rather than following an institutional approach of exploring how Sehgal's works are best to be integrated into

the museum's regular processes and systems, I focused on the points of friction and tension and the disruption that is caused when these works enter museum collections. In an attempt to capture and keep the memory of the work alive, some museums organised "re-fresh" meetings and re-enactments that facilitated an ongoing engagement with the interpreters and the artist or his producer as memory holders. The acquisition of Sehgal's works, and particularly the ban on producing documentation of the performance, not only drew attention to a "seen but unnoticed" aspect of conservation — that of embodied and oral memory — it also raised awareness for different forms and understandings of what is considered to be proper documentation. In addition, it shed light on a particular feature of memorisation: namely its dissemination, and the challenges that arise from this. In theory, the handing down of Sehgal's work to the museum is well thought-out. The specificities of the sale provide a protocol for the museum allowing the work to persist. This essay has, however, demonstrated that, in practice, the handing down of his artworks is less simple than most literature suggests.

While the research into several museum practices provided insight into different solutions, the question remains as to whether the prohibition of documentation leads to erosion, neglect, or even disappearance of the work, or actually encourages a more rigid transference than expected. In case of the latter, this would go against the still dominant understanding of documentation as a kind of objectified fixed knowledge, in opposition to oral history as both living memory and a more subjective and fluid mode of preservation. Do the anxiety to forget, and the wish to remember in this case, in fact lead to less leeway in re-iteration and more uniformity than transmission based on living memory and through oral communication would at first sight suggest? Perhaps it is too soon to answer these questions. In each effect, it would require a long-term comparative study of the practices of remembrance *and* the successive re-iterations of these works in different museum collections.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank colleagues from the New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art Research Group, the interviewees, the organizers and members of the audience of the Performing Documentation Conference, as well as Sherri Irvin and the anonymous reviewers for their insights and fruitful comments to earlier versions of this text.



### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The recent proliferation of documentation guidelines and collection databases re-affirms this tradition as they emphasise the significance of documentation as a form of materialised memory for the conservation of contemporary art.

<sup>2</sup> With some exceptions such as: Umatham, Sandra. 2009. "Given the Tino Sehgal Case; How to Save the Future of a Work of Art that Materializes Only Temporarily." *Theatre Research International* 34 (2): 194-199. Giguère, Amélie. 2012. *Art Contemporain et documentation: La muséalisation d'un corpus de pièces éphémères de type performance*. Université du Québec à Montréal and Université d'Avignon et des pays de Vaucluse. And Laurenson, Pip and Vivian van Saaze. 2014. Collecting Performance-Based Art: New Challenges and Shifting Perspectives. In: Remes, O., MacCulloch, L. and Leino, M. (eds.). *Performativity in the Gallery. Staging Interactive Encounters*. Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 27-41.

<sup>3</sup> Research was conducted at the Guggenheim, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; and Tate, London. The research is also informed by investigations undertaken for 'Collecting the Performative: A research network examining emerging practice for collecting and conserving performance-based art. This two-year research project (2012-2014) draws upon the practices of dance, activism, and theatre in order to understand how legacy is created in these disciplines that have informed performance art — and to learn how this may inform museum practices of collecting performance-based art. Project website: <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/collecting-performative>

<sup>4</sup> Although less strict, other contemporary artists such as Roman Ondák have also refused the documentation of their work.

<sup>5</sup> For more insight on the complex relationships between performance and its documentation, see for example: Auslander (2006), Reason (2006), and Schneider (2011).

- <sup>6</sup> In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003) Diana Taylor convincingly argues the need to move beyond the dichotomy.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Sydney Briggs, Associate Registrar at MoMA, 30 November 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> See also Amélie Giguère's research into the acquisition of *Kiss* by the FNAC and the Art Gallery of Ontario, available at: <http://www.archipel.uqam.ca/4942/>.
- <sup>9</sup> See for example: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/ef939b02-d19f-11df-b3e1-00144feabdc0.html> and <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/conservation/time-based-media>
- <sup>10</sup> In her PhD thesis Giguère provides insight in how Sehgal's work *Kiss* is acquired by the FNAC in Paris and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Canada. Her research is based on interviews with the responsible museum professionals and her experience as an assistant on the occasion of an exhibition of *Kiss* in March 2010 at AGO.
- <sup>11</sup> A useful analogue is provided in computer science where distributed memory systems are referred to as multi-processor machines comprised of several processors each holding individual memory. A disadvantage of distributed memory is that it does not offer a unified space in which all data can be found. Interprocessor communication through network design is therefore more difficult and expensive; it requires the programmer to think about data distribution. See on the notion of 'distributed memory' in computer science: Patterson, David A. and John L. Hennessy. 2007. *Computer architecture: a quantitative approach*, Fourth Edition, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 201.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview Sydney Briggs, Associate Registrar at MoMA, 30 November 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Sydney Briggs, Associate Registrar at MoMA, 30 November 2010. See also Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014, 36-37.
- <sup>14</sup> See Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014.

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