



YOUR  
MOMENT  
OF TRUTH...

by Laurel Saville

These pieces are not performance art or theater. They are political and social commentary. And they come from a very simple, original question: How can one produce something without producing anything?

Down a long, unmarked hallway at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York City sits a square, bare room of white walls and wood floors. Half a dozen people, dressed as if they just came in off the street, are standing, lounging or leaning against the walls. A visitor crosses the threshold. The people in the room lift themselves in unison and move gracefully to a new position on the canvas that is the gallery space. In low and slurred voices they greet their guest: "Welcome to this situation."

It's a bit like walking into the enchanted forest of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* just as the trees come alive. But instead of being pelted with apples, the visitor is confronted with occasional quotes from historical figures, which the players use as a launching pad to discuss everything from aesthetics to consumerism. If another visitor enters the space, the players stop their conversation and restart the sequence.

The experience is disconcerting. You wonder what you're supposed to do and what these people are talking about and why. The tone of the discussion alternates between the intellectual discourse that one imagines took place in the salons of Paris, to the stilted, self-conscious and sophomoric musings of teenagers in a student lounge. Occasionally, a player might even look at a visitor directly and ask "What do you think?" But even following what's being said is difficult; you're simultaneously trying to figure out what's going on and what's expected of you while you struggle with the fact that art isn't supposed to behave this way.

But this is exactly the challenge that Berlin-based con-

temporary artist Tino Sehgal imposes on visitors to "This Situation." As with his other pieces, the artist is looking for a deeper level of engagement between art and audience. In "This Is New," museum attendants read newspaper headlines and visitor responses determine the continuation of the work. In "This Success/This Failure," young children pull passersby into an empty room to play. In "This Situation," Sehgal is asking the audience to consider larger issues along with the players, while expressing his discomfort with our culture's love affair with consumption and his impatience with the conventional search for political solutions. "The big new task of my generation is, how can we morally defend our lifestyle, which will not be possible for future generations," he says. "A political solution won't do it."

For Sehgal, who studied economics in college, this "task" began at home, with the self. "I thought, 'Is it possible to have a life and not use a lot of material resources?'" he says, describing his evolution into an artist. "I thought, let me try it just with myself. I have nothing to lose, so I'll do this as a personal experiment." Dance became a means for him to put this experiment into action. "Economics was a theoretical thing, and dance was a practical thing, a solution for myself that allowed me to be occupied with something, without using natural resources," he explains. "I was doing something, but I wasn't producing anything. I was producing nothing and something at the same time." But dance soon proved too limiting, with too much separation between performers and viewers. Sehgal began to work with the human body and mind as his medium. While fostering human contact is certainly an important part of Sehgal's goals, he also makes larger claims for his artwork.

"My work is not political in a symbolic and representational sense," he says. "Rather I'm offering a practical proposition of how to do things [in a more sustainable manner]. This is labor intensive, it offers employment, it doesn't use lots of natural resources. This is what sustainable production could look like."

However, it's an obvious paradox that this artistic statement about sustainability and humanity is taking place in a kind of ivory tower that is, by its very nature, elitist and exclusionary. After all, how many people actually go into museums or art galleries? How many people have the luxury to think about issues like overproduction when they're trying to get by? Sehgal believes this reality just gives his work another layer of meaning.

"The museum is a political place because it's a public space," he says. "When children come in, they learn that the material thing is valuable. The next thing they learn is the notion of the commodity of the product. It's not a coincidence that so much talk about art is about what it costs. We make things, we transform them, we sell them. What we do in society is what we do in art."

While Sehgal does not make objects, he does sell the product of his ideas and labor. A certain number of buyers can purchase the right to have the work performed again, under their auspices. In keeping with his “leave no trace” ethic, transactions are made with a handshake and witnessed by a notary. And yet, isn’t Sehgal trying to subvert what society is doing with his art? For some, this may all be part of the artwork’s message; others feel Sehgal is trying to have it both ways.

“The authoritarianism of the piece is troublesome,” points out Bruno LeMieux-Ruibal, an art critic for *Lápiz International Art Magazine*. “The artist allows no photos, no press releases, no books, no recordings, nothing at all. Only the experience itself, and an experience that comes mediated by the performers. It is as if we the visitors (and galleries, museums and curators) were at the mercy of Tino Sehgal, the puppet master. He does what he pleases with us all. While participating in “This Situation,” I was never able to forget that those six people were paid to play for an artist and a gallery trying to sell an artwork. You can be radical, but only to a point.”

One visitor found the entire approach of the piece suspect. Ashley Mears, a PhD candidate in sociology at New York University and admittedly “not much of an art person,” points out, “As much as artist types and creators try to claim that they’re doing something really accessible for the masses, this is kind of a shtick that they put on, because if you don’t say you’re not invested in commercialism then you lose your grandeur as an artist. By not recording it, maybe that’s just another layer of pretense. I wouldn’t read too much into it that it’s a great or helpful thing for the world.”

But despite her reservations, Mears did find the piece challenged her to consider her world in a slightly different way. “The gallery is at 5<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> streets, it was right around Christmas, the area is a complete smorgasbord of shopping and bright lights,” she recalls. “You go into a luxury build-

ing, then you go into this big, white cube, you step into the space, everyone stops and looks at you and says their thing. I was nervous, I was sweaty, I felt like I was in the way, and didn’t know where to stand.”

When Mears left the pristine, white box of “This Situation,” she was plunged back out into the over-bright world of New York City’s shoppers’ Mecca. “I went into the flagship Abercrombie & Fitch store afterwards,” she reports. “I just wanted to see what it was all about. It was a madhouse. They have shirtless models to greet you, strobe lights, pungent perfume in the air. It was really ironic, having just come from Sehgal’s piece. I was critical, but also just curious and in awe and even more so because in the art piece, what was really up for discussion was shopping. But it wasn’t presented as one way of thinking. It didn’t say shopping was horrible, and we should end it. It was much more complicated than a simple critique.”

Perhaps then, the ultimate and certainly important effect of Sehgal’s work is simply to encourage people to look at their world with bigger, broader questions in mind. He is creating “situations” where people can come together and experience the expansion of their own thoughts and ideas in the company of others doing the same. Which is, sad to say, a very rare experience in our over-consuming, over-busy, overcrowded lives.

And unlike most art – and so much of our cultural landscape – which allows you to remain a passive viewer and gives you implicit permission to keep your ideas locked up inside your own head, Sehgal’s work confronts you with the challenge and the opportunity to participate. You may choose to keep your mouth shut and your hands tied, but you are still faced with the undeniable courage of others who are not only sharing their own messy thoughts, but then taking a leap across the invisible barriers that divide us to look you in the face and ask the simple, loaded, portentous question, “What do you think?”





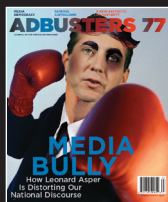
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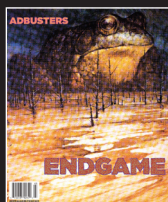
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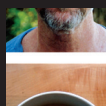
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**LOE RUSSELL**  
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2007  
Orange Sky Productions



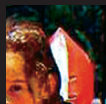
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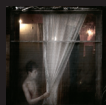
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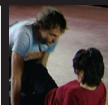
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*Ashton and Paul Metairie, LA 1999*  
*Perilous Pilgrimage series*  
williamgreiner.com  
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**JULIO BITTENCOURT**  
*In A Window Of Prestes Maia*  
911 Building  
juliobittencourt.com  
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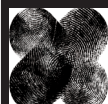
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*Mayday V*  
2006  
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*Tino Sehgal photo*  
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**RICHARD ROSS**  
richardross.net  
*Aperture Exhibition, NYC*  
May 22 – July 31  
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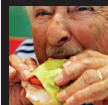
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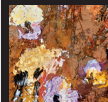
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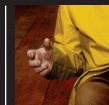
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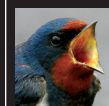
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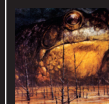
**ANSELM KIEFER**  
*Aperiat terra et germinet salvatorem*  
2006  
Mixed Media  
110 1/4 × 220 1/2 in (280 × 560 cm)  
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*Container Yard #2, Seattle*  
chrisjordan.com  
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Eric Klinenberg is an associate professor of sociology at New York University, and a fellow at the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. His first book, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, won several scholarly and literary prizes, and his second book, *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media*, was recently released as a paperback from Henry Holt.

In addition to his academic research, Klinenberg has written for the *New York Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Nation*, and NPR's 'This American Life.'



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Laurel Saville writes articles, books, fiction and corporate communications from her home in Albany, NY. She has written four books on various design topics, including *Design Secrets: Furniture, Outdoor Stonework*, and *100 Habits of Successful Publication Designers*. She writes regularly for *Step Inside Design* and *Dynamic Graphics* magazines and her short stories, essays and articles have appeared in *Ellipses*, *Literally Speaking* and *Seven Days*. She won the first Vermont Emerging Writers contest and was a finalist for *Fiction* magazine's unsolicited competition.



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Dee Hon is a Vancouver-based freelance journalist specializing in politics, economics and science. His investigative articles about campaign finance violations triggered a major election scandal in his home province of British Columbia and helped force new regulations. Hon's work has appeared in *The Tyee*, *Vancouver magazine* and the *Georgia Straight*. He was named a finalist for a Jack Webster Science and Technology Award for his articles on attention deficit disorder.