



PERFORMANCE ART IN THE MAKING: DISTRIBUTED KNOWLEDGE AND NEW DEPENDENCIES

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ABSTRACT While traditionally the act of making artworks transpired in the artist's studio, this process has been extended with the rise of conceptual, installation and performance art in the past century. Many contemporary works are designed to be activated in the museum and engage multiple staff members in production processes beyond their customary responsibilities and expertise. But when it comes to performance-based works this re-conceptualisation of traditional notions of artistic practice and the act of making is even more acute. Unlike more traditional works of art, performance works require continuous work and interaction throughout the period of an exhibition, as the museum works with the artist and performers to keep the work alive. This means that many more persons, staff members as well as others including hired performers and members of the public, are co-opted into the act of making. Informed by an investigation into two works by Tino Sehgal held at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, this paper explores how this 'continued making' challenges traditional notions of the art object and forces new dependencies for care within and beyond the museum. A new perspective is introduced through the concept of infrastructure as derived from the works of sociologist Susan Leigh Star.

Introduction

In *Installation Art and the Museum* (2013), Vivian van Saaze employs the phrase 'doing artworks' in order to demonstrate that many contemporary artworks are lacking a stable appearance and rely on a degree of intervention by museum professionals for their continued display.¹ This reflects the fact that while traditionally the act of making artworks transpired in the artist's studio, this process has been extended with the rise of conceptual and installation art in the past century.² Many such works only come into being as a work of art through the process of their instalment or display, a process that can be enacted multiple times and in multiple spaces and requires the engagement of staff members in production processes beyond their customary responsibilities and expertise.³ Such works tend to unfold over time, thus confronting the perception of an artwork with a fixed identity or moment of creation. This paper aims to shed light on the challenges associated with this 'continued making'⁴ required by such artworks, with a particular

focus on performance-based artworks held in museum collections, introducing two works by British-German artist Tino Sehgal as case studies. It will contribute a new perspective by analysing these challenges through the lens of infrastructure theory.⁵

Institutional challenges

While these extended production practices apply to many contemporary artworks, when it comes to performance-based works in permanent collections, increasingly ubiquitous in museums across the globe, this re-conceptualisation of traditional notions of artistic practice and the challenges involved in their display are even more acute. Typically tasked with the exhibition and conservation of an art object, in acquiring and showing performance-based art museums are compelled to act in a way more in keeping with the production of an event. In terms of resources, displaying performances tends to be an expensive and protracted

undertaking for museums.⁶ And both performers and museum professionals have voiced the struggles involved in situating performance-based works within the museum due to the lack of existing structures and roles in place for presenting an event-style artwork, in effect a production, as opposed to displaying an object or collection of objects.⁷

Another challenge is the necessity of maintaining a regular cycle of display in order to ensure that the knowledge necessary to stage a work remains accessible. As Laurensen and Van Saaze state, this is often not feasible within the typical life cycle of the museum: 'There is a disconnect between the frequency of the cycles that exist currently within the museum and the frequency of the refresh cycles that are required to maintain certain types of performance-based works'.⁸ As with many artworks, preservation is dependent on their display, and this is a big challenge to museums, particularly in the age of blockbuster exhibitions and the experience economy where museums must be seen to be exhibiting the new and the exciting in order to draw in crowds.

The focus of this paper is the particular challenges of two works by British-German artist Tino Sehgal in the permanent collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.⁹ Sehgal (b.1976) is known for his 'constructed situations': staged encounters that take place within the museum that typically consist of semi-rehearsed meetings or displays, strongly interactive in nature, and enacted by anyone from hired 'interpreters' (his preferred term) to museum attendants or the general public.¹⁰

Sehgal's works are a particularly interesting launching pad for an analysis of how traditional models of visual art production are being subverted, since the artist is well known for his desire to undermine the prevalent conviction affirmed by the visual arts that economic value must exist in a physical object. The artist notoriously prohibits any type of visual documentation or tangible record of his works, such as documentary photography or visual exhibition and press materials. The acquisition process is similarly strict: any sale takes place via oral agreements rather than written contracts, in order to avoid a paper trail. Although in practice, this goal is rarely achieved in its entirety and paper trails inevitably materialise such as proofs of transaction and written documentation.

However, such an approach is completely at odds with the typical workings of a museum wherein documentation and record-keeping is paramount,¹¹ and nowhere more so than in the maintenance of conceptual, ephemeral, and variable works.¹² As Dorothea von Hantelmann describes, 'Sehgal's work has the character of an experiment at the heart of which lies the question of how to create something from nothing; how to semantically create meaning and create economic value without producing a physical object'.¹³

Although Sehgal's restrictions on documentation might appear to make him the exception to the norm, the challenges raised by his works are indicative of many of the challenges relating to the display and care of performance art more generally. Sehgal and his practice are particularly

demonstrative of the evolving nature of the relationship between artist and museum that has developed with the rise of recent contemporary art. The relationship and boundaries between artists and museums have shifted substantially as contemporary art museums are forced to allow for artists to maintain a significant role in the display and maintenance of their works.¹⁴ And bearing in mind the (desired) lack of documentation, paired with the absence of an explicit art 'object', the museum is more dependent than ever on Sehgal and his team for the remaking of their acquired works in the future.

While the lack of documentation is specific to Sehgal, it only further complicates a challenge associated with the majority of performance artworks in museum collections in that the material conditions needed to display or 'remake' the artwork are not explicit. In which case the institution is increasingly reliant on preserving knowledge associated with the work. On the one hand, such knowledge exists with the artist, which can pose issues in itself, since the museum is thus wholly dependent on an outside source for the preservation of an artwork it has purchased. But on the other hand, the extended production practices whereby the artwork comes into being in the museum can mean that knowledge of the work is distributed among multiple members of staff, such as curators, but also exhibition development, project managers, production team staff, members of the research team and public/audience outreach. They have all engaged with the work and yet there may be no structure in place for the preservation of such knowledge. These challenges can be better understood through infrastructure theory, particularly the work of sociologist Susan Leigh Star.

Infrastructural barriers and facilitators

According to Star, the ecology of, for example, a workplace, home, or school, 'is profoundly impacted by the relatively unstudied infrastructure that permeates all its functions'.¹⁵ As she says, 'study a city and neglect its sewers and power supplies (as many have), and you miss essential aspects of distributional justice and planning power'.¹⁶ Just as with any other workplace, the museum is home to often overlooked systems and structures that are, in Star's words, 'by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work'.¹⁷ In order to understand the challenge of collecting the relevant knowledge related to Sehgal's artworks at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, it is important to foreground these backstage elements of work practice by looking at the technologies and arrangements of the museum, which are often so standardised or customary as to go unnoticed.

Star and Bowker describe infrastructure as 'that which runs "underneath" actual structures', as 'that upon which something else rides, or works, a platform of sorts'.¹⁸ The reason why a consideration of infrastructure is helpful in relation to the challenges associated with performance art is that it allows us to understand the systems and structures currently in place for the collection, registration and

stewardship of artworks in museums and how in many ways these traditional structures are called into question by the arrival of more variable or ephemeral pieces.

This notion of infrastructure is particularly beneficial in relation to the study of Sehgal's works for its ability to highlight the situations in which certain people or things (or artworks in this case) are not served by a particular infrastructure. As Star describes, 'for a railroad engineer, the rails are not infrastructure but topic. For the person in a wheelchair, the stairs and doorjamb in front of a building are not seamless subtenders of use, but barriers. One person's infrastructure is another's topic, or difficulty'.¹⁹ The same is arguably true for the works of Tino Sehgal in the museum. Much of the infrastructure and conventions of practice that have been established and work so well for object-like artworks, act more as a barrier than a facilitator in the context of performance works. What barriers therefore exist in the preservation of knowledge associated with Sehgal's works at the Stedelijk Museum?

The museum holds two works by Tino Sehgal in its collection and in 2015 staged a year-long survey of Sehgal's works. It acquired its first work by the artist, *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) in 2005 and its second, *This Variation* (2012) at the end of 2017. Despite this engagement, during almost every discussion or interview I had with staff members, they made it clear that they did not feel they were in a position to be answering questions on the topic at hand, particularly any concerning the work of Tino Sehgal. This tied in with another common reaction by employees at the first point of contact, in that they would attempt to redirect me to another employee or department, often despite having some direct association with either the collection of Sehgal's work or its later exhibition. There seemed to be a widely held feeling that the 'real' knowledge was obtainable elsewhere and that I would be better off speaking to someone else.

Perhaps this is a result of Sehgal's restrictions on written or visual documentation in that the subversion of conventional museum practices led staff members to believe they were not in possession of substantial information. However, it could also be a symptom of what I perceived to be a nervousness around assuming knowledge of a work where the responsibility for its care and stewardship was unclear.

The obstacle to preservation here seems to be that the 'master narrative' of the museum acts as a mental barrier to knowledge holders recognising the value of the knowledge of which they are in possession. The 'master narrative' is a concept developed by Star, who describes it as a 'single voice that does not problematise diversity' and which 'speaks unconsciously from the presumed centre of things'.²⁰ She gives examples of how this master narrative can be encoded or embedded in infrastructure, taking the case of an imaginary medical history form for women that encoded monogamous traditional heterosexuality as the only class of responses through the use of spaces for 'maiden name', 'husband's name, and 'form of birth

control'. She describes how such an instance would not allow for any other sexual practices or relationships that might be medically or otherwise pertinent. In the case of the Stedelijk Museum, the master narrative embedded in the infrastructure is so closely aligned with object-like artworks and the type of knowledge traditionally required to display and care for them that it is preventing staff members from recognising the pertinence of the knowledge they hold for less traditional works.

Nevertheless, as one Stedelijk curator explained, there *was* a great deal of institutional knowledge held in the museum resulting from staff involvement in the production of Sehgal's artworks:

Because of course you cannot put anything on paper, so it is within the people who work on the project. And most of us are still here so [the production team] for instance is very knowledgeable about all kinds of practicalities of developing certain types of certain works. Within my experience of course, it is also within the experience of people, or the technical crew, so to say, who are still here. But of course, it is something that you can keep up by doing, for instance, *This Variation*. If you put that up again then it gets recharged in a way but yeah it is very much in a team that is still here ... So, in that sense you feel as if the fabric is still there, but it is something you have to maintain. And you can only maintain it by doing the piece. You cannot theoretically maintain it. It is practice-based.

And yet, such tacit knowledge is at risk of being lost, in part since repeated restagings do not fit within the typical exhibition structure or life cycle of the museum, as mentioned earlier, but also because conventional museum forms of classification are no longer suitable. As another museum staff member described:

So that is maybe at the core of I think the most complicated aspect of live works, that they go beyond database registration ... this database system was purely developed for physical objects, and not so much performative aspects.

While these systems work well for object-based works, they are not necessarily appropriate for the stewardship of performance artworks, where the expertise necessary for (re)staging and conservation is perhaps more tacit or alternatively lies beyond the museum walls. In recent years a number of scholars and practitioners have developed alternative documentation models in order to counter the challenges associated with non-traditional artworks, most notably Joanna Phillips' new documentation model for time-based media art, and several proposals from the Tate, including *The Live List* derived from the *Collecting the Performative* research network,²¹ and the most recent strategy developed in the 2019 article by Lawson et al.²² But how do the documentation models outlined above, for instance,

accommodate the more tacit knowledge of the work built up by staff members, performers and others during the recurring cycles of display?

During my interviews at the Stedelijk Museum, staff from a variety of departments spoke about how they felt much of the knowledge needed to enact Sehgal's works had become embodied during the process of experiencing and learning the practicalities of displaying his work, and that it would be necessary to activate this if displaying his work again and it is in this manner that the knowledge could be 'recharged' (see the curator's quote above). This allusion to tacit knowledge is interesting since part of Sehgal's stated reasoning behind his rejection of documentation is that he is keen to avoid 'static renderings archiving the work' and instead sees the potential of body-to-body transmission for the conservation of artworks.²³

Such an approach has in fact been outlined previously in the context of other artists. Marçal, for example, makes the case for the need to involve participatory conservation practices in the preservation of some performance artworks, wherein the conservator actively participates in the performance of the artwork. She argues that 'it is through participation in a performance that the body of the conservator becomes an archive of that performance's practices; which could not be transmitted so fully otherwise'.²⁴

This sentiment is echoed by Holbrook, who addresses what she terms 'physical knowledge transfer' as a method of conservation, using the case of Simone Forti's *Dance Constructions* as an example.²⁵ In her paper, Holbrook describes her experiences of documenting and participating in the workshops, rehearsals and performances of a staging of *Dance Constructions* at Vleeshal in the Netherlands in 2016. In her view, by actively participating in the work of performance art, she was able to convey a more nuanced documentation of the work and effectively became the 'institutional memory' of it, while nevertheless acknowledging that such a position was not expedient for any one member of staff to adopt. Therefore, Holbrook attempts to focus the direction outwards, examining how an institution might 'actively engage in maintaining the dynamic ecosystems in which this knowledge exists and thrives' while 'facilitating opportunities for knowledge transfer'.²⁶ But how would such an approach work in practice? Such strategies trouble the existing museum infrastructure in that they are extremely reliant on the individual and thus are vulnerable in the long term (what is more they require significant resources that are not typically at the disposal of many institutions). Likewise, it still neglects the network of knowledge built up within the museum.

Among staff members at the Stedelijk Museum there was clearly a fear regarding lost knowledge which came up again and again. A great deal of knowledge was alluded to by those I interviewed but there seemed to be no real means of accessing it for future iterations. This seems to be partly because the necessary knowledge and expertise garnered from the staging of an event-like work is so different from a visual arts object-like work. There was some anxiety focused on the reliance that there will be on those initially

involved in staging the works, stating how wherever the staff may be they will have to be recalled to help put on the work if it is ever to be displayed again. A few even referenced what they perceive to be the fragility of this situation, stating how other works in the collection require similar embodied knowledge and yet have not been displayed for 30 years – the implication being that the knowledge will have dissipated. Likewise, another staff member alluded to the difficulty of bringing people together and the fallibility of human memory. The risk here is that such knowledge will be lost, and it certainly felt that was the case at times, particularly when trying to find information regarding the first display of the acquired work at the museum, which proved quite challenging. Many of those who had been present at the time had since left and even among those who remained in the museum, memories of the exhibition were hazy. This calls into question Sehgal's vision of his work being preserved through the passing down of knowledge within the museum.

The issue is that such know-how or tacit knowledge is often hard to express, and people can be unaware of their possession of the knowledge or of its value. This brings us back to the earlier idea of people assuming that the 'real' knowledge was elsewhere. My experience at the Stedelijk Museum showed me that knowledge of Sehgal's artworks is mainly tacit and distributed widely and inconsistently among many different players. The scant material documentation that did exist was dispersed among individuals and departments. The solution would seem to be that further sustainable collaboration interdepartmentally within the museum is needed. This would reduce the vulnerability of dependence on individual staff members being the sole holders of 'institutional memory' but also would add to the current infrastructure by creating a space where collaboratively staff members could become aware of the value of the knowledge they possess.

Both Lawson et al. and Phillips²⁷ emphasise the criticality of drawing together knowledge and experiences distributed throughout the institution. The Tate, for instance, has developed its *Map of Interactions* as part of its new strategy in order to map the networks of those involved in the care of these artworks.²⁸ Meanwhile Phillips' documentation model emphasises the input of different stakeholders and multiple team members and the drawing together of cross-institutional knowledge. And yet the current infrastructure at many institutions (particularly those without the resources, expertise and commitment available at Tate and the Guggenheim) fails to support this or in fact can actively hinder such cross-institutional collaboration because of conventional conceptions of staff roles and departmental divisions that are more suited to traditional artworks rather than performance works. Staff members at the Stedelijk Museum assuming that the 'real' knowledge lay elsewhere, for instance, suggests that certain artworks have the potential to 'fall through the cracks' so to speak since the efforts necessary to maintain them do not fall neatly within the confines of traditional roles and institutional priorities.

Conclusion

This paper set out to shed light on the challenges related to the extended production practices associated with the rise of performance-based art entering the permanent collection of museums through an approach derived from infrastructure theory. It has focused on Star's notion that 'one person's infrastructure is another's topic, or difficulty',²⁹ which serves to highlight the fact that established infrastructures related to the care and display of object-based artworks, including the strict division of responsibilities between departments and the importance of in-house expertise, are not always well suited to non-traditional works such as those of Sehgal held in the Stedelijk Museum. What is clear is that particular artworks require and depend upon particular networks of knowledge, people and skills. It is only by mobilising these networks around the artwork that distributed, tacit knowledge might become more explicit. One of the first steps towards addressing this issue lies in the raising of institutional awareness. While some institutions have taken steps to address the challenge – for instance, by forming working groups aimed at fostering collaboration³⁰ – many lack the resources or the organisational commitment to do so.

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Notes

1. Van Saaze 2013: 27.
2. Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014.
3. Ibid.
4. Of note here is Laurenson's (2006) influential theory of authenticity (derived from Goodman 1976) in which she proposed the 'two-stage' model in relation to time-based media artworks, which makes a distinction between a work's creation (translated into a score) and its various manifestations or iterations. The supposition at the foundation of this paper, however, is that a work's score may not indeed be a fixed entity and can instead transform over time dependent on context and other factors. As Laurenson and Van Saaze point out, many of the performance artworks currently entering museums are 'less bounded and may be designed to evolve over time' (Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014: 38).
5. Star 1999; Star and Bowker 2002.
6. Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014: 38.
7. See, e.g. Wookey 2015: 65, 128.
8. Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014: 36–7.

9. Empirical data were collected during three months (January–March 2017) of ethnographic research at the Stedelijk Museum where I worked as an intern and through multiple semi-structured interviews with museum staff members conducted during this time and since. I interviewed a wide range of staff members, including members of the curatorial team, exhibition development, production team, conservation department as well as those working in research, public service and development. This undertaking was part of wider research conducted at multiple institutions for my PhD thesis within the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network (ITN) *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (NACCA, 2015–2020) funded by the European Union H2020 Programme (H2020-MSCA-ITN-2014) under Grant Agreement n°642892.
10. It must be acknowledged that Tino Sehgal does not like his artworks to be referred to as performance pieces, hence the term 'constructed situations', and does not refer to himself as a performance artist. Likewise, he requests that the performers hired to enact his works are in turn titled 'interpreters'. Nevertheless, it is par for the course that Sehgal is discussed within the performance art tradition, both in museums, and in an array of literature.
11. Van Saaze 2015.
12. Wharton 2015.
13. Von Hantelmann 2010: 151.
14. Buskirk 2003; Frieling 2014.
15. Star 2002: 117.
16. Star 1999: 379.
17. Star 1999: 380.
18. Star and Bowker 2002: np.
19. Star 1999: 380.
20. Star 1999: 384.
21. Phillips 2015. See Pip Laurenson et al. 'The Live List: What to Consider When Collecting Live Works', *Collecting the Performative Network*, 24 January 2014. Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/collecting-performative/live-list> (accessed 12 May 2021).
22. The Tate's new strategy encompasses three documentation templates: a *Performance Specification*, 'used to capture written information about performance-based artworks', an *Activation Report*, 'used to capture the work in action', and a *Map of Interactions* 'which captures the network of relations involved in each performance' (Lawson et al. 2019: 115).
23. Lane and Wdowin-McGregor 2016.
24. Marçal 2017: 102.
25. Holbrook 2018.
26. Holbrook 2018: 122.
27. Lawson et al. 2019; Phillips 2015.
28. Lawson et al. 2019: 12–14.
29. Star 1999: 380.
30. The Stedelijk Museum's official partnership with NACCA (see note 9 above) is one such example.

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Biography

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