

Interpreting Relational Art: 'This Variation' and 'These Associations' by Tino Sehgal

[What do you think the goal is when we interpret artworks? What special problems do you see when it comes to the interpretation of art compared to other forms of interpretation?]

"In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself . . . Nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood: it is rather the working out of possibilities projected in understanding."

–Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1962

In the following essay I will explore the concept of interpretation of art demonstrated on artworks 'This Variation' and 'These Associations' by Tino Sehgal, in reference to paradigms used in Relational Aesthetics, as introduced by Nicolas Bourriaud. Interpretation of relational art differs significantly from [traditional] interpretation of a [traditional] piece of art.¹ Relational art implements specific tools of perception, embodiment and interactivity that provide a platform for heterogeneous interpretations. I will argue that the key goal of interpreting relational art, which is at the same time its main strength, is that such interpretation enhances our sense of individual and collective existence in an immediate response to the artwork. Interpretation in relational aesthetics not only serves to justify our own being by direct interaction with the artwork, but in correlation it also positions us within the larger inter-social framework surrounding it. Experience of relational art is inseparable from interpretation and such cohabitation provokes immediate intellectual and sensual ecstasy. The self, unable to fully master itself, welcomes such external stimuli. As Paul Ricoeur writes: "Self-knowledge only comes through our relation to the world and our life with and among others in that world."²

Nicolas Bourriaud introduced the term 'relational aesthetics' in 1998 in his book of the same title. Relational aesthetics is "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."³ It is closely interconnected with terms site- or situation-specific art⁴ and is rooted within avant-garde movements of the 1960s, such as DADA, performance, body art, happenings and fluxus. Relational art, historically following the aforementioned disciplines, appeared in mid-1990s as another de-commodified art discipline and as a reaction to over-institutionalisation of the art world. This de-commercialisation, however, is a relative state and has been subject to gentrification of art (or cultural gentrification), eventually turning into a new type of commodity.

In relational art, artworks take on ephemeral character of situations or interactive contexts. These 'artwork situations' are constructed, or initiated by the artist, but neither the process nor the result are pre-determined by her. The content of the relational artwork resides in the interaction of the audience with the artwork and in their own interpretation of the given situation. Indeed, the artwork is still inherently intertwined within a larger context, or contexts, and remains to a certain degree

¹ 'traditional' piece of art in terms of material, objectified artwork.

² Duehauer, "Paul Ricoeur"

³ Bourriaud (1998, p.113)

⁴ See Doherty, Claire. *Situation* (London, 2009)

subject to classical paradigms of aesthetics.⁵ Through appearing and participating in such constructed situation, the audience is on inter-social level 'learning to inhabit world in a better way.'⁶

Relational art presents us with absolute interpretative potential: we are not only contemplating and observing artwork and subjecting it to interpretation, as [it is more likely] in traditional art, but also, being ourselves the artwork, interpreting our own position in relation to it, to the artist, to other members of the audience, and to larger context within and out-with the work. We are not presented with any obvious concepts to follow and the creation of a meaning is left solely up to us. Standard approaches of hermeneutics or semantics fall short in such situation; as we are interpreting something completely unknown and uncertain.

According to traditional definition interpretation of art is "a stage in the work of art criticism following the describing and analysing of an artwork, in which one identifies the work's expressive qualities, or the meaning, or the mood, or idea communicated to the viewer."⁷ But why do we even have the need to interpret works of art? Susan Sontag is famously criticising the over interpretation of artwork in her essay '*Against Interpretation*.' Is it not possible to experience art immediately, 'without having the need to implement sense into it, to dissect it and justify it?'⁸ she asks. Sontag's notion of interpretation seems rather shorthanded. Her version is perceived as a tool of medieval torture, whereas for Terry Barrett this is a much more diplomatic process. In his essay '*Principles on Interpreting Art*' he writes: "[when interpreting] we do not aim to obtain a specific definition, but rather get an insight into the whole context of the artwork."⁹ Through careful observation, certain looseness of limbs and eye, sensitive thinking, and through timbre and nuance¹⁰ the artwork shares its meaning with its interpreter. It speaks to us through its form, content and through the indefinable in-between, whilst keeping its dynamics and momentum at the same time. Perception of artwork functions in terms of interaction: between the initial interaction of artist and her artwork, then between the artwork and the audience, between the artist and the audience, between institution and the artwork and so on.

Barrett further distinguishes interpretation into individual and communal interpretation.¹¹ When interpreting, we use a number of individual notions, such as emotions and senses, but also knowledge and reasoning. However, through categorisation, it is possible to achieve objective meaning, states Barrett. It is plausible to reach an interpretation that is 'better' than the other ones, if it is based on combination of observing factual characteristics and juxtaposing them with their context, surroundings and their impact. Such 'better' interpretation might then use elements from both individual and communal interpretation. When judging artwork, we should not try to implement artificial values (whether aesthetic, philosophic, and socio-ethical) but rather they should appear naturally, within harmony of the work's formal and abstract values.

⁵ Such as e.g. institutional context, intention of the artist, socio-cultural background.

⁶ Bourriaud (1998, p.13)

⁷ ArtLex, "Interpret and Interpretation"

⁸ Sontag (1994)

⁹ Barrett (1994)

¹⁰ Timbre and nuance are 'something in-between;' they are art qualities that 'do not lend themselves to interpretation of dialogue and dialectic.' It refers to something that escape presentation yet embraces an infinite amount of interpretations. They represent "immaterial matter," hold no reference and can never be translated into any of the ruling discourses of social and cultural sphere. Lyotard (1991, p.140) See Lyotard, J-F. 'Can Thought go on without a Body' 'After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics.'

¹¹ Barrett (1994, p.294).

How do we, however, approach interpretation of art and what 'tools' and processes do we use to interpret artwork? The tools differ depending on the context in which the artwork is placed: within institution, the role of curator gains authority. We receive artificial tools such as the background, the narrative and the artist's intention in form of accompanying text, labels, talks, and other. Outside of institution the tools might be offered through discourse with artist or say, relation to current issues. What information is relevant in artistic interpretation, and to what extent the artist's intention should be allowed to determine the appropriate interpretation, has been always a point in philosophical debates.¹² According to Carlshamre, when interpreting art we can either be supplying meaning to an object, that is, providing for a lack of meaning ('reading' an artwork) or discovering something that is hidden and not immediately obvious ('claim').¹³ So the way we intentionally interpret depends on what we want to interpret, or in other words, what we want to achieve by such interpretation. However, these notions always take interpretation as intentional, rationalised instance. Such explanations make sense if we have an actual object, or even a certain directed situation or performance. However, how do we approach art interpretation if we are coping with an art piece that is absolutely open to interpretation? The interpretation itself becomes the artwork and functions on a much more immediate and spontaneous basis.

But let me introduce Tino Sehgal and his works, so that it is clearer what I mean by 'absolutely open interpretation.' Sehgal (b.1976) is a British-German artist and trained dancer, currently based in Berlin. He is one of the most prominent conceptual artist at the contemporary art scene. His works are, in his own words, 'constructed situations,' completely object-free, consisting solely of improvised situation existing in time and addressing the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. The situations work with both choreographed and random bodies of trained volunteers (called 'interpreters') and with the [bodies of] audience. The artworks are ever changing and in constant flux, depending on the reactions of the visitors. Sehgal has been radically against any way of documentation or commodification of his work, and the imagery of his work is, considering our digital age, surprisingly scarce. When 'selling' his artwork, Sehgal refuses written instructions and documentation, and receipts. His work is sold on oral basis and under prohibition of being photographed, or recorded.¹⁴ His latest work is currently exhibited in Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and consists of nonstop live presentation (from opening to closing time) of Sehgal's work for the duration of 365 days.

For his art pieces '*This Variation*' and '*These Associations*,' Sehgal was nominated for the 2013 Turner Prize (which, to great relief of many, he did not receive.) It could be said that Sehgal's art works exist solely in his mind, his memory and in the memories of the audience and participants. You enter '*This Variation*' by stepping into a dark room, temporarily blinded and only gradually getting used to the surrounding darkness. There are voices and sounds around you and you can feel the bodies of interpreters and other visitors moving nearby. At points, someone touches you – on purpose, or accidentally, you do not know. The trained interpreters act depending on your reactions. If you say something, you might hear it soon echoing from the walls, if you make a movement, you might notice familiar pattern moving in front of you within a couple of seconds. What does this mean? What are

¹² Barrett (1994, p.294)

¹³ Carlshamre (2015)

¹⁴ "When one of his "situations" is sold, the work is described verbally in the presence of lawyers and certain stipulations are made orally: the work must be installed by a person trained by Mr Sehgal; the people enacting the piece must be paid a decent wage; the work must be shown for a minimum of six weeks (the length of an exhibition rather than a theatre performance); and the piece cannot be photographed." S.T. The Fine Art of Human Interaction The Economist (July 2012) (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2012/07/tino-sehgal>)

you supposed to do? And – of course, the ever-present question, is this art?¹⁵ *These Associations* were presented in the same year, 2012, in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. It consists of a 'crowd' of seventy storytellers, performers pacing the hall and sharing the most private stories with the audience. Their performance seems random, they run, shout, chant, talk, and stop. Everyone is on stage here, getting dragged into conversations, sharing their own secrets and participating in the performance. Do you join in? Do you sit aside and observe? Is this making you uncomfortable?¹⁶

This is just a brief description of Sehgal's two pieces. Sehgal's art is one of the arguably most radical popular relational works. Bourriaud does not mention Sehgal in his essay from the 90s (Sehgal only stepped onto the art scene in 2000) and he examines the work namely of artists such as Gillian Wearing, Philippe Parreno, Douglas Gordon, Liam Gillick, Carsten Höller or Rirkrit Tiravanija¹⁷, all of them different yet connected by the shared theme of social interaction being vital for the works they produce. Bourriaud curated a controversial exhibition *Traffic* at CAPC Bourdeaux in 1996 that represented relational artists of the time. There are indeed many more artists with we could think of and that Bourriaud omits, such as Marina Abramović with her work *Rhythm 0*, 1974 or Chris Burden with *Shoot*, 1972.¹⁸ When encountering such unexpected situations, placed into art context, you do not know how to react. You might feel awkward, or find the whole situation ludicrous, or it might make you feel uncomfortable. You might want to leave. It is obvious that when interpreting relational art, there is no singular goal for achieving a meaning, nor are there any distinguishable methods of interpretation.

Claire Bishop, criticises relational aesthetics for trivialising the social structures to intra-structures.¹⁹ Relational artists, as described by Bourriaud, follow the already established order and they do not aim to challenge it. As Bourriaud writes, the problematics of art today is not, as it was in modernism, to broaden the boundaries of art but rather stretching its capacities in terms of social interaction.²⁰ Bishop's criticism is that such relational situations should expose what is in imbalance in the society, rather than just conform to the situation and 'make it feel better,' as this would provide more polemic grounds for our interrogation into interpretation and "for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other,"²¹ For Bishop, the value of relational art would ascend if it was contextualising the work in socio-political context.

How does this relate to the question of interpretation? Bishop's criticism, if valid, is not entirely convincing,²² and it introduces another layer of interpretation of art works, the political. Whether we

¹⁵ Which, luckily, is not an argument to discuss today.

¹⁶ The description of Sehgal's work is my individual interpretation, as based on reading on Sehgal's work, reviews of his exhibitions and impressions collected from the internet. My interpretation is thus second-hand and not empirical: it is based on accumulated documentation as a means to (re)interpret.

¹⁷Travanija's work *Pad Thai*, in which he transformed the gallery space into improvised kitchen, where he cooked curry and distributed in amongst the gallery visitors, first appeared in 303 Gallery, New York in 1992 and has been since restaged several times under name *untitled (Free/Still)*, most recently at Art Basel 2015.

¹⁸ For more see video produced by Marina Abramović Institute (<https://vimeo.com/71952791>) or 'The Art Story' (<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-burden-chris.htm>) on Burden's piece.

¹⁹ "The feel-good positions adopted by Tiravanija and Gillick are reflected in their ubiquitous presence on the international art scene, and their status as perennial favorites of a few curators who have become known for promoting their preferred selection of artists (..) In such a cozy situation, art does not feel the need to defend itself, and it collapses into compensatory (and self-congratulatory) entertainment" Bishop (2004, p.79)

²⁰ Bourriaud (1998)

²¹ Bishop (2004)

²² There is no reason why relational art should, in fact, be political, and not only focus on questioning inter-social relations.

like it or not, even 'apolitical' art makes certain statement. Today, relational art has evolved since the 1990s and is frequently spoken of as 'social art' practice.²³ Curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist, Maria Lind, or Hou Hanrou emerged, re-packaging the concept of relational art into that of a 'laboratory' experiment.'²⁴ The artwork, likened to an experiment in a laboratory, is in constant flux with the result uncertain, yet surrounded by contextual background, by research. One of the characteristics of social art is its actively critical approach to socio-political situation, thus responding to Bishop's main criticism or [apolitical] relational aesthetics. This new layer of meaning puts social art on a different level than that of initial relational aesthetics: it makes it more 'filled with relevant meaning' yet less immediate. Social art is also much more closely connected to technology and aware of the constant presence of the media, as opposed to Sehgal's total dismissal of it.

If we recall Susan Sontag's heated essay '*Against Interpretation*,' she writes that interpretation is not an absolute value. We implement interpretation because it makes art manageable and puts us at ease, "because real art has the capacity to make us nervous."²⁵ Sontag's argument is that interpretation is often artificially implemented, which results in serving against the intuitive, natural way [or natural interpretation] of an artwork. When put in relation to relational art, this argument might prove two-folded. Experience and interpretation of relational art has an immediate character: our bodies and minds are directly addressed to explain themselves and their purpose when disquieted in an unpredictable art setting. In '*This Variation*' our body is surrounded by darkness, by other bodies, by voices and context pregnant with meanings, and the mind acts immediately. Although this might at first sound like what Sontag means by direct and sensual experience of art, what would such experience be, without us interpreting it? It would be – exactly nothing, simply a body surrounded by darkness. Yet, we need the darkness in order to heighten the presence of mind, as Lyotard writes: "Sensation emerges from that nothingness which is the 'presence' of a blank, and it is threatened by being engulfed in it. Art is the vow the soul makes to escape from the senses' promise of death."²⁶ Through inner dialogue with Sehgal's artwork, we elate our body's experience as we justify its presence as well as the intellectual meaning.

But, is it then possible to interpret relational artwork on objective basis, and what instruments do we need to include in such interpretation? As already mentioned at the beginning of this essay, objective interpretation of artwork is possible, according to Barrett. One interpretation might be better than the others, if based on facts and placed within actual framework, and context of the piece. Such interpretation combines communal as well as individual notions. With relational art, however, this might be much more complicated, as it offers unlimited interpretations that we can professedly form only on individual basis. It seems that such interpretation cannot be objective in the sense of offering concrete answers, or even unified concrete questions. Nonetheless, our interpretation of relational art can still find itself in an objective environment – it can, if it is a successful piece, present us with a relatable position, that, in theory, should be in similar manner, relatable for everyone else. It remains, however, that the main goal of relational art is not to provide objectivity. Its main goal is to inter-

²³ Lütticken (2015)

²⁴ "Hans Ulrich Obrist: "The truly contemporary exhibition should express connective possibilities and make propositions. And, perhaps surprisingly, such an exhibition should reconnect with the laboratory years of twentieth-century exhibition practice....The truly contemporary exhibition with its striking quality of unfinishedness and incompleteness would trigger *pars pro toto* participation" (Obrist, "Battery, Kraftwerk and Laboratory," in *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, ed. Carin Kuoni [New York: Independent Curators International, 2001], p.129)

²⁵ Sontag (1994 (1966))

²⁶ Lyotard (2004, pp. 102)

connect subjectivity and explore relationships that is created through the uncertainty of limitless interpretations. Bishop's need for greater socio-political tie would here be obsolete, as the vagueness is exactly what makes relational art special, and specific for interpretation.

I believe that we can find similar traits of open interpretation in composed music. Let us look at a very abstract discipline and say that we are to 'interpret' a scientific, mathematical problem. This is easy, as mathematics obliges to mathematical laws. We would approach the problem to incorporate abstract way of thinking based on our knowledge and reasoning, and subject to mathematical logic. For this, we do not need to consider any historical contexts. With music²⁷ we get a different sort of abstract, but the idea remains similar. Musical interpretation balances on a similar undefinable fence as relational art. When interpreting a musical composition, we might consider its background, the story of its creation and biographical data of the composer. However, for an immediate interpretation of mind and body, their response to rhythm, tones and patterns, this is not necessary. We interpret music in terms of how it affects us and what it conveys to us, without any demands for it to be more political, or more socially engaged. Strangely enough, music is rarely being scrutinised and stripped naked in search for its hidden agenda. It is let to live its own independent, abstract life, and is left open to free – but simpler - interpretation.

The problem when interpreting art is that it closely combines several layers of meaning that are usually more distinctly separated, or less intertwined, in other disciplines. Contemporary art is constantly under demand to take into account not only the whole historical context of far beyond arts and culture, but also the current development in social, political and economic spheres, on internal and external basis, and national and international scope. As described by Bourriaud, relational work of art is creating so called social interstices that stay "over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value."²⁸ The meaning is transient and is discovered throughout the interaction and [can be] only frame-worked by the interaction itself. Such works cannot be mis-interpreted, but are open to free interpretation, which makes them appealing and refreshing, yet at the same time uncanny and potentially dangerous. Interpretation of relational art does not follow any goals nor does it search for specific meanings. Instead, the meanings are embedded within the process of interaction and immediate interpretation when encountering the art work. It is needless to say that interpretation as understood in terms of relational art represents only a very specific niche, quite different to what interpretation of art in general aims to achieve. However, this small demonstration on Tino Sehgal's artwork identifies some of the challenges that interpretation faces in contemporary art. The extremely transient character of relational art destabilises our traditional understanding of art-world and of the way we experience, interpret and interact with art. It forces us to ask questions and constantly re-appropriate new concepts and, so to speak, 'keeps us on our toes.'

²⁷ Here by 'abstract music' I mean compositional music without lyrics: classical or jazz compositions, improvised jazz, idm or electronic music etc.

²⁸ Bourriaud (1998, p.16)

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