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Event/Site

Abstract

Biennial curators have increasingly invoked experience as what they are offering in the sites they are attempting to charge with contemporary meaning. This is suggestive, since enduring historical links join the sites of the Grand Tour, package tourism, object-based art history, and museums. xCharged sites, x in this context, provides a stimulating invitation to note larger idiosyncrasies in the objectics of art history, in the sites of our disciplinarity field. Built on a Baedeker-like armature, art history distills the heterogeneous experience and information of privileged travel into a canon – supported, of course, by the authoritative archival document. Yet the very touristic itineraries charted by proliferating contemporary biennals – Istanbul, Gwangju, Dakar, Shanghai – re-route art history’s normative Western mainstream. Recent tensions between art historical categories and contemporary biennial culture’s call to experience will be the focus of this paper, particularly in regard to Tino Sehgal’s constructed situations. x I will explore Alain Badiou’s xœuvres éventuelles x(several sites) as a way to think through the complexities of site, experience, and notation, theorized as spatial, interpersonal and discursive realms in which the new can come into being, but only through the rupture that is an event.

x[...x there can be no doubt that all our cognition begins with experience [Erfahrung] versus xErlebnis. For what else might rouse our cognitive power to its operation if objects stirring our senses did not do so?x (Kant, 1790)1

Introduction

Note that Kant needs an object, but only to provoke experience – this is the core conundrum of consciousness that still puzzles neuroscientists today. The object is predicated on a continuous existence before us, and after us. Yet to consider art an aesthetic object, x designated by Kant as xpurposive without purpose, x is already to remove it from its everyday situation, and to make its existence contingent upon our attention. Put differently, and in the terms of today’s session, the aesthetic operates to remove something from its site, x simultaneously calling up a particular form of subjectivity that distinguishes a xdisinterestedx aesthetic modality from the purposes of survival, religion, craft functionality, buildings as shelter, body ornament, garden design, or decoration. Kant, who transformed Abraham Baumgarten’s aesthetics into rational philosophy, did so by imagining the operation of judgment as divinable from experience but also xseparable from its – in part through the literal dislocation of art, and object, from site.

Art history and aesthetics (to say nothing of museums and collecting) are inextricably beholden to these operations of dislocation. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, having followed the Grand Tour itinerary (at that point only vicariously), could wax poetic about the Laocoon only because it had already been dislocated from its original site and reproduced. Probably commissioned by Roman Emperor Tiberius for his pleasure grotto at Sperlonga and praised by Pliny, the virtuosic group sculpture was long lost, then unearthed during Roman street repairs in 1506. Immediately claimed for the Belvedere courtyard by Pope Julius, the Laocoon would have been observed by Winckelmann – once he got to Rome – as it had been installed in an elaborate niche emphasizing its frontal properties. x This situational only mimicked the more general art historical operations then in formation, constituted by processes of ekphrasis, reproduction, and other forms of mediation and distribution – epistemic dislocations fundamental to the discursive operations of our field. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, publishing his own account of the Laocoon against Winckelmann’s in 1766, knew the sculpture only through engravings, published when the reconstruction of the sculpture was in heated debate. These relations of mediation versus claims to sedent presence were built into the competing moral claims of art writing, as established in the Enlightenment and continued today. Lessing’s very distance from the site of Classical Rome, which he visited only after writing his foundational text, was an unapologetic grounding for his spirited attack on Winckelmann’s more embodied narrative. Lessing’s regulatory model proclaims: x[...x the [visual] artist must [...] set certain restraints upon expression [...] the master of the Laocoon was obliged to exercise moderation in expressing physical pain [because] of the special nature of the visual arts, their limitations, and their requirements.x x The history of this regulatory model of aesthetics is well-known. What I want to emphasize here is the way that its Western modernity depends precisely on a dislocation of reception from the site circumscription of art – procedures that must continually be re-performed, only to be undone again, by the embodied aesthetics of experience.

I invoke the long history of these dislocating operations to frame my interests in notions of experience, site, and event in contemporary art. When Samuel Morse made his unsuccessful bid at being an artist by painting xThe Gallery of the Louvre (1831–1833), x he was utilizing established artistic strategies to produce, at one and the same time, a simulacral xexperiencex for his viewers, while initiating the very process of its enactment away from the original site. Such curious modes of testament, transcription, and translocation, I suggest, are also endemic to contemporary biennial culture, equally embroiled with experience and site, dislocated and communicated by reproductive media. No longer recorded in objectics such as paintings or engravings, the aesthetics of the site are to be registered in xexperiences transported by the body of the viewer – but of course, there is the ubiquitous photograph. Whether authorized by the artists’ gallery or snapped on the sly by cellphone, the digital image is our contemporary index of experience and token of its claims.

Tropes of experience make bodies themselves into media in which sites can register their charge. Such notions emerged forcefully in 2005, when the Lyon Biennial was titled xExpérience de la durée,x offering a variety of fun-house encounters. x That same year the Venice Biennale was titled xThe Experience of Art,x followed by the 2007 edition xThink with the Senses, Feel with the Mind.x With the role of objects often minimized (think, for example, of Olafur Eliasson’s installation in the 2003 Venice Biennale’s Danish pavilion – xRoom of one colorx – simply a room suffused by a pure wavelength of light), the enhanced site emerges as a primary trigger for the promised experience. What I would like to privilege today are occasions in which the site propels the conjuction of tourism, art, experience, and history into the rupture of an event.

Alain Badiou’s xBeing and Eventx is useful here, leveraged in my own thinking by latter-day Marxians developing notions of xcapitalism x cognitix indebted to Antonio Negri,x examining the post-industrial shift toward information economies and the art
associated with those developments. Often carried on under the name of Duchamp or Merleau-Ponty, art since the 70s has de-emphasized objects in favor of new forms of embodied sociability, evolving into an aesthetics of experience deeply embroiled with the post-industrial site. This aesthetics of the resonant site, and biennial culture in general, is highly dependent on time-based, non-visual, discursive and/or embodied media that stimulate different kinds of art-historical xfield notes, in which experience is assembled over time and composes itself from travel, hearsay, buzz, serendipitous networking, note- and photo-taking. I willingly risk being banal by asserting that this activity can also engage what Badiou calls xle site éventementiel or xevental site; I will also occasionally translate this as an xeventful site. In the practice of our most savvy artists, engaged with creative curators, the evental site is a place in which the art propels a kind of spatial and temporal Being that ruptures aesthetic experience and then constitutes it – returning to enter the political. In sum, event charges the site.

As exemplary of this process, I turn to a philosophical and art historical analysis of the xconstructed situations of Tino Sehgal. For those unfamiliar with this kind of event-based art, it has an important context in the world’s biennals – as exemplified by Hans Haacke’s prize-winning 1993 intervention in the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale (fig. 1). Invited to demonstrate a newly united Germany’s leadership of the 21st century, US-based Haacke effectively destroyed the marble flooring installed by Speer during the Nazi period, and released visitors to experience the rubble of Hitlerian pretension under their feet, while simultaneously creating a tabula rasa and privileging Germany’s renewed mastery of its own complex past and ambitious future. Twelve years later, Berlin-based Tino Sehgal was invited to the same site, where he trained opera singers to serve as guards in his otherwise empty half of the German pavilion, delighting visitors with their performative singing of the work’s title: »Oh! It’s so contemporary, contemporary, Tino Sehgal, 2005, courtesy the artist.« This title, when so sung in liveliness and in the site, constitutes the piece. But while it usefully introduces Sehgal’s work, it’s so contemporary does not yet exemplify the way in which the making of an event can charge a site, or release its embedded politics. For that I turn to another Sehgal work.

In specific, I will examine Sehgal’s «Kiss» as localized in the 2006 Berlin Biennial. «Kiss», 2002, as with the Sehgal work we have just examined, is performed – although the artist eschews the rubric of xperformance art. »Sehgal is rigorous to the point of obsession about not trading in documentation; the discourse about him obediently repeats: »Upon completion of the exhibition, no physical trace of the work of art remains.« No photography is authorized, and no reproduction of unauthorized photography is allowed. While the proliferation of images from private cellphone cameras, uploaded to flickr and tumblr sites on the web would seem to belie Sehgal’s doctrinal position, such images can also be seen to differ constitutively from the artworld fetish for high-quality relics of performance art, some sold in galleries for very high-end prices. Sehgal-related web documentation can be seen, in contrast to sauladex photography, to constitute the murmur of reception: blogs, discussions, videoteadips interviews, personal confessionals – a treasure trove for the trolling art historian, occasionally punctuated by a request from the artist to remove the photographs from the web. But this material also problematizes the operations of art history by its very evanesence, subjectivity, and dynamism; these are not stable objects being documented, but always, self-consciously, records or indices of xperiences.« Notionally then, the work »even in its documentation« reproduces an aesthetics of experience; in this I allude to the important work of historians of performance art such as Amelia Jones and Mechtilde Widrich. In her work on Valie Export, Widrich in particular has shown how the existence and transmission of a photograph is itself performative, making an event and accumulating cultural memory.«

But what interests us about Sehgal’s injunction against official photography is its insistence that static imagery is not a place-holder for the working of the art. As a result, Sehgal’s work in particular helps us understand that experiences are instantiated in specific sites, constitutively different with each encounter – despite the fact that the continually refreshed labor of the performers is carefully choreographed. As one website discussed the work I experienced in Berlin: »An eight-minute choreographed loop, Kiss presents a man and a woman rapturously embraced and enacting different interpretations of some well-known kisses from art history – such as those by Auguste Rodin, Constantin Brancusi, Edward Munch and Jeff Koons. Alternating couples act as interpreters of Sehgal’s work, moving constantly and morphing slowly from one kiss to the next. At the end of the sequence, the man and woman seamlessly change roles and the continuum is reenacted [...] danced continuously during all public gallery hours.«

Yet »dance« is a curious verb, for what I experienced in Berlin was not on a stage, nor was any post-Cunningham choreography of dance steps in evidence. »Kiss« presented two young people – a man and a woman in my experience – intertwining on the floor of a decaying dancehall on Auguststrasse, sometimes upright and sometimes prone, surrounded by corroding mirrors that reflected the awkward xviewers and performers back onto themselves. This mirrored situation became part of the piece, crucial to my experience of the Berlin site.

The visitor learned before ascending to the second floor that this Berlin »Ballhaus had been opened in 1913 and remained active throughout the dramatic shifts in Germany’s political landscape.
This supplementary process is what produces knowledge and consolidates new modes of being, allowing the Kantian work of judgment and the forming of the *sensus communis*. That is, if Enlightenment claims to universalism have been abandoned in our time, collective and cumulative knowledge has not; Badiou helps extend notions of being and event to a *concrete analysis of the locality of the procedure* – which I here apply to the biennial and its repurposed urban and post-industrial sites. The site, then, plays a crucial role. Compare what I have told you about Kiss at the site in Auguststrasse to its presentation at New York’s Guggenheim Museum, where Sehgal’s work was located in the center of the Frank Lloyd Wright rotunda, dwarfed by the soaring, spiraling architecture and justifiably ignored by the museum’s visitors. Berlin’s *Ballhaus*, by contrast, was crucial to my experience of rupture and event. As I saw myself in the corroded mirrors opposite the performers, as they made cold eye contact with me and enforced my voyeurism of their choreographed erotics, I was interpellated into the entire history of Auguststrasse, of the Ballhaus, of the peculiarly German seductions of fascism or totalitarian communism then and now. Locality, duration, the *punctum* of event were annealed into the shiver of embodied knowledge – *Erfahrung*, I want to claim, not *Erlebniss* – constituting, in my argument, the elements of art that keep the experience economy from consuming all possible outcomes of biennial encounters.

True, Badiou’s theory of the *site* événementiel risks romantic avant-gardism. But I have asserted my experience of the Berlin *Kiss* (duly deconstructed to acknowledge the subjectivating discourses preceding it) to put the more pragmatic components of Badiou’s set theory and its durational supplements into practice. In addition to the redolence of the Berlin site, the work’s art historical quotations interpellated me as a desiring and gendered (not to say over-educated) subject of Western culture, with all of the ideologies of individuation that this erotic differentiation implies. (In my case, I enjoyed identifying with the fully-participating female to Rodin’s relaxed male, the exhilarating phallic abstraction of a Brancusi kiss, or even the successive experiments-in-repetition of Andy Warhol – my own *un*authorized *insertion* of yet another *Kiss* into Sehgal’s art historical litany.) I also experienced an echo of Dan Graham’s conceptual performances (namely, *Performers/Audience/Mirror*, 1975), called up by the contingent presence of mirrors and the oscillating self-consciousness and consciousness of others that they brought into being. Similarly, the Berlin version of *Kiss* also collectivized its various viewers, sweeping each of us into an awkward, post-totalitarian present of togetherness in all our separation, showing another, larger set to which this *Kiss* could belong. To cite Badiou: *The multiple – whose concept [set theory] thinks without defining its signification [...] is neither supported by the existence of the one nor unfolded as an organic totality. The multiple consists from being without-one, or multiple of multiples, and the categories of Aristotle (or Kant), Unity and Totality, cannot help us grasp it.*

For Badiou, in other words, mathematical set theory helps cut through metaphysical language, and the ontological and theological baggage of soneness, *multitude*, and so forth (fig. 3).

Simply put, *if* B is included in A, *every* multiple which belongs to B is also belonging to A. So it doesn’t matter if A is *One*, (set of elements) or *whole*, (set of parts) [...] *We-who-are-in-the-room become part of the set formed by *Kiss*, and thus B is included in A, even if B designates the art-visitor bodies as separate from A, which contains the choreographed ones. The theories and histories in which we insert an experience of *Kiss* in Berlin (as collectivizing) help yield its status as event, but do not write out the other components of the set (as individuating and erotic), or the all-important

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(Fig. 2). Flirtation, love, and erotic coupling took place here through two World Wars and in the Cold War to follow, enlivened and no doubt intensified by their schisms. In this architecture, there is neither theatrical lighting nor proscenium nor stage – ballrooms being unique in producing everyone in their confines as both spectator and *performer*. What constituted Sehgal’s *Kiss* as event (speaking only for myself, but hoping to convince you as my potential community) emerged in two forms of mirroring. In the first, the corroding daylit space was haunted by the German past, discursively induced by the curators of the biennial and saturating all of the Auguststrasse sites. Adding to this infusion of ghosts was the implication of us as viewers into that history through the corroded mirrors. But a second level of reflection occurred during the shivering, rupturing moment when the performers made eye contact with me – presumably as directed. This Brechtian break in performance conventions produced a radical empiricism and a phenomenology of reflective practice. This was, in other words, Badiou’s *site* événementiel, captured by the awkward English neologism *eventual site*. In his 1998 *L’Etre et l’Événement*, (translated into English as *Being and Events* in 2005, and into German that same year as *Das Sein und das Ereignis*), Badiou puts Heidegger in confrontation with set theory to understand the *punctum* of evental being. This is felicitous for thinking biennial culture, in which agents of contemporaneity perpetually frame the art as event, encouraging the possibility that what can happen there will be new: a future coming-into-being, a performative public produced in praxis (*e.g.*, *experiences*) that nonetheless allows, per Badiou, for *the* long slow
discursive and durational supplements of texts such as my own. In my reading of Badiou, the non-collapse of these units (the stubborn multiplicity of an individual placed into a set) allows for the scalar jump that makes an Event of experience, and a slowly accruing politics of that encounter.

In the final analysis, the rupture of Sehgal’s contribution to the Berlin biennial also initiates a suture. This is how set B can become part of set A, through an incision, an insertion, and a closure. We are thrown into self-consciousness by mirrored eye contact with the performers, but then integrated by another set of mirrors into the ongoing unfolding of the piece. We are storns from spectatorship, then sutured as the performative publics that does the work of art.11 Hurlled from aesthetic reverie into Being, we are at the same moment torn out of Being and socalated and xconnected to a formerly distant historical and political site. And these hyper-individuating moments can be collectivized via brochures at the biennial site, documentation on the web, in Skypes, texts, and emails, or through in-person narratives such as my own. Even if Sehgal will intervene in web discussions to attempt the removal of a posted photograph, the larger public for his work will continue to circulate these talismans of being there, for we have become the performative public set into motion by his reconstructed situations. He can choose the charged site with the curator and craft the ruptures that will release its embedded politics – but he is not capable of curtailing the performative ripples that expand out from such an intervention. In the locale of Berlin’s Auguststrasse in 2006, Sehgal’s piece proved the most capable (for me) of doing this global work of art, which is to say that it drew on the extensive local situation into which it was inserted only to rupture with the established order of things and produce a site for new knowledge through the event. Experience names both the punctum of the event, and the process of its understanding – amalgamated to an evental site in which a different world might not merely be pictured, but produced.19

Notes

2 But see Seymour Howard’s more rotational reconstruction, in which the son at the viewer’s right is placed effectively behind Lacocon, requiring perambulation of the statue to parse its composition; Seymour Howard: On the Reconstruction of the Vatican Laocoön Group. In: American Journal of Archaeology, 63, 1959, pp. 365–369, esp. pl. 94.
4 Pitched as a Bergsonian rejection of instrumentalized, industrial time, the exhibition was also billed by curators Jerôme Sens and Nicolas Bourriau as evoking the idea of art as experience (an implicit nod to the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey), seeking to reaffirm that a work of art is first and foremost an event [...].
8 See the Tumblr site for the recent Sehgal These Associations at the Tate Turbine Hall in London, fall 2012, http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/tino-sehgal [17.10.2012]: «So go see this if you can. They were walking towards us all in a line, slow motion, we didn’t realise we were in the right room yet [...] suddenly we were in their way and didn’t know whether to get out of it or just stare back and a woman stopped and started telling a story and walked away immediately and we immediately wanted to follow even though we weren’t sure yet what was happening. It got more and more surreal and the stories got more and more personal and there were numerous people around you singing and the lights were going on and off and they gave you the most intense stirs which you were allowed to stare back at in the way you have to do slyly with normal strangers. You wanted to join in and sit back and watch at the same time and part of you wanted to get away from this growing intense feeling and there was a part of you that wasn’t going to let you leave for a week.» Posted by pinetrees.andapples.x a.k.a. xLily x 17.10.2012.
12 Oliver Feltham on Badiou’s philosophy. In: Being and Event 2005 (note 10), p. XXVIII.
13 Feltham 2005 (note 11).
15 Badiou 2005 (note 10), p. 82.
17 For a polemical version of this argument, see Caroline A. Jones: Staged Presence. In: Artforum, May 2010.
18 Feltham 2005 (note 11), introduction to Badiou.
19 There are certainly echoes in this of earlier formations, such as that analyzed by Robert Langbaum in describing the poetry of experience from the 19th to 20th centuries: That essential idea [of romanticism which] is [...] the doctrine of experience – the doctrine that the imaginative apprehension gained through immediate experience is primary and certain, whereas the analytic reflection that follows is secondary and problematical. The [...] poetry of experience [...] makes its statement not as an idea but as an experience [...]. Robert Langbaum: The Poetry of Experience. New York 1957, pp. 35–36, brought to my attention by Timothy Peltason.

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