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RECURSION AND THE QUESTION:

'WHEN IS ART?'

THE CASE OF TINO SEHGAL[1]

Tim Stott

Two recent works by artist Tino Sehgal require us to ask again Goodman's question, 'when is art?' No documentation of any sort—no recordings, no contract of sale, no notation of instructions, and neither script nor score—is provided of these works, which consist of little more than performances repeated for the duration of an exhibition and whatever commentary is made upon these in various formats and media (reviews, press listings, word-of-mouth, and so on). These works are clearly not things, in the everyday sense of the word. As Sehgal describes it, their production consists of the transformation of actions, not materials, and includes 'de-production', a process by which the work 'undoes' itself.[2] So again, in this case the question '*what* is art?', or indeed, '*what kind of thing* is art?', is the wrong question to ask. Instead, with Goodman, we might address art as a temporal rather than a substantive problem.

That said, in answering the question 'when?' with regard to these works, it will be necessary to take into account something dismissed by Goodman in his own attempt to provide clues as to when a particular symbolic activity can be described as artistic—namely, self-reference. I contend that a crucial aspect of what these works do *as art* is to make self-reference productive, or more precisely, recursive. To understand how this is done will require us to supplement Goodman's insights with the theoretical resources of a particular field of criticism derived from second-order cybernetics, which for some time has worked through how self-reference is productive of recursive forms.

First of all, here is a summary of each of the works and of what might be at stake in them.

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[1] Graduate paper presented at the 2011 British Society of Aesthetics Annual Conference at the Old College, University of Edinburgh, 16th to 18th September.

[2] Tino Sehgal, no title, in Kremer, M., Hlavajova, M. and Fletcher, A. eds., *Now What? Artists Write!* (Utrecht/Frankfurt: BAK/Revolver, 2004), 170.

This Objective of That Object (2004). Passing through a corridor in the ICA, London, a visitor is approached by five people walking backwards toward her until she is surrounded. These five 'performers' speak in unison the following phrase, first muttered quietly and then declared clearly and repeatedly: 'The objective of this work is to become the object of a discussion'. If the visitor makes no comment, of whatever kind, then after a few minutes the performers will sink to floor, still speaking the phrase, but weakly and disjointedly, until all of them lay still and silent. If, however, the visitor comments at all, which might be just clearing her throat, grumbling beneath her breath, or laughing, the performers will exclaim excitedly: 'We have a comment! We have a comment! Who will answer?' One of them will volunteer, and a conversation will begin among them until they have another comment, and so on.

This appears to be a work in need of its own commentary, without which it ceases to continue. In order to include this commentary, the work must, paradoxically, repeat itself in something other than itself. It does this by taking the visitor's comment as the object of conversation. This distributes the work in such a way that the visitor cannot be uninvolved in its continuation,[3] certainly, but more importantly, the work repeats itself in something other than itself. As the use of *this* and *that* in the title demonstrates, the work divides in order to be posited.

This Success, This Failure (2007). For this work, Sehgal opened the same ICA gallery space as a playground for children from nearby inner-city schools. Provided with neither props nor toys, the children were given two instructions: first, that they create their own means of play, and second, that when a visitor to the gallery encounters them playing at least one of the children approaches that visitor, states her name and declares whether or not her play and the play of her co-performers is to be considered a success or a failure. The criteria for success and failure were given by the children themselves and were to act as a prompt for discussion. Arguably, just what these criteria might be is less significant than what the work *does* here.

The visitor, once again, cannot be uninvolved in the form of the work once he or she is addressed by one of the players. More so than with *This Objective of That Object*, there is no observation that is not also participation. And once again the work divides as it is observed. The observation made by the visitor is one that is in communication with the player who has been instructed to leave the group of play and address this visitor. Communication might fail or it might develop in any number of more or less predictable ways, but however that may be, it is such that it always refers to a common object of observation—the children's play, of course, but also the communication between observers of the work.

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[3] See Tom Griffin, 'Tino Sehgal: An Interview', *Artforum* XLIII, no. 9, May 2005.

That the form of the work includes both of these indicates that in referring to itself the work must be itself and not itself, the same and not the same from one moment to the next. What is important is not how such a work might resolve this paradox but, as noted, how it is made recursive. This leads us again to the question, 'when is art?', because how the work *takes time* is bound to the mode by which its form recurs.

So what is recursive form?

a. Recursive Form

One of the principal models of recursive form as it is developed within second-order cybernetics derives from the work of English mathematician George Spencer Brown, especially his *Laws of Form*, published in 1969. In elaborating a 'calculus of form', Spencer Brown attempts to demonstrate that the construction of a form is consistent with the construction of a world. The key operation of this construction is recursion, or what Spencer Brown terms 're-entry'. Some explanation is required. Take a form to be a distinction that has two sides, x/not-x (or, with our present examples, performers/visitors). Initially, the observation of the distinction is inseparable from the distinction itself. To be observed, the form requires a second distinction between observer and observed. The first observer (who drew the distinction) can be observed only by a second. The introduction of this 'second-order' observation is what Spencer Brown calls 're-entry into the form'.[4]

For a first-order observer, the difference x/not-x, although operative, remains invisible. Only with second-order observation does the difference x/not-x become visible *inside* the form. Self-reference is not possible with first-order observation because the position of the observer, although presupposed, is not observable. Only second-order observation allows self-reference. But observed thus, the form is paradoxical, because without any reference to an external point of observation it is x and not-x at once.

In summary, one can make the following claims. First of all, structurally, the form is both sides, x/not-x, at the same time, and therefore paradoxical; but operationally, the form is sequential—a sequence of preferences for one side or another of re-entered distinctions. This allows what is distinguished to be observed apart from the distinction itself, but only by performing observations sequentially.[5] Thus, as Francisco Varela once

[4] George Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 69.

[5] Niklas Luhmann, 'The Paradox of Form' in Dirk Baecker, ed. *The Problems of Form*, translated by M. Irmscher and L. Edwards, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 19.

declared, self-reference connects 'quite naturally' with time.[6] A second point is that by understanding form in this way we are able to ask the question: where is the observer, or 'who distinguishes and how'?[7] This is an important question to ask of works that, on the one hand, and however minimally, choreograph observation and make this choreography observable, and on the other hand, present some object to be observed in the absence of the conventions of medium-specificity.[8] Thirdly, as form becomes recursive on the basis of re-entered observations, it also *constructs*, and does so in the face of indeterminacy. The indecision of the paradox of form (what is 'inside' and what is 'outside', or who is a performer and who a visitor) is decided upon moment to moment, and those selections made with each decision now recur within the form. In this way, recursion constructs relatively stable objects on the basis of arbitrary or insignificant initial distinctions: a gallery visitor clearing her throat, the evaluative criteria of a childrens' game, the instruction to approach a visitor, and so on.

What guarantees a work of art's status as a form is not whether or not it persists as a material object (however ill-defined such a description might be) but whether or not it constitutes a particular type of communicative event, the form of which recurs in further communications. Only through this recurrence is an object given.

Von Foerster describes objects as tokens for stable behaviour in an autopoietic system. The '*eigen*-behaviour' or constancy of objects is due to the recursive application of observations to their own results.[9] This is how objects must be understood if observers are included in what they observe—or, arguably, if visitors are to be included as participants.[10] For an observer, an object is a recurrent selection and a constraint, and as a constraint, an object *stands against* an observer as something that objects to and restricts behaviour. A visitor clearing her throat, say, now becomes the

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[6] See Francisco Varela, 'A Calculus for Self-Reference', *International Journal of General Systems*, 2:1(1975), 20.

[7] David Roberts, 'Self-Reference in Literature', in Baecker, ed. *The Problems of Form*, 31.

[8] As Rosalind Krauss has argued, the collapse in the latter half of the twentieth century of those traditional techniques, materials and conventions of display that differentiated painting from sculpture, dance from film, and so on, and which served as the basis for medium-specific production and evaluation, has meant that medium, instead of being specific, must now be understood as a recursive structure capable of specifying itself. *'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 7.

[9] Lynn Segal gives the example of a child playing with a ball: 'After sufficient interaction, [the child] begins to experience the ball as an invariant. His recursive behaviour, operating on the result of his previous operations, reaches a stability.' Segal, L. *The Dream of Reality: Heinz von Foerster's Constructivism*, (New York: Norton & Co., 1986), 142.

[10] Heinz Von Foerster, 'Objects: Tokens for (Eigen-) Behaviours', in *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition*, (New York: Springer, 2003), 261.

object of discussion, selected for further communications by which the form of the work recurs.

Consider again *This Success, This Failure*. The instruction given to the player who addresses the visitor is an instruction to observe the form of the work within the form. The child must add an observation of success/failure to that of play/not-play. It is likely that this second-order observation was operative in the children's play, but, arguably, it was not observed (this is very much a moot point). A child has to take herself out of play in order to observe that play, but in doing so she does not leave the form of the work. The address to a visitor furthers re-enters the form into the form, as an external reference (to the visitor) is asked to corroborate the self-reference of the form (the player's evaluation). Already, at this stage, the work is complex, and will become more so as further observations become available for communication. If, for example, the player decides that their play was a failure, then the 'other side' of the distinction success/failure has been selected and what was latent (as the 'other side' of the form of the children's play) now becomes available on 'this side' of the form. This generates uncertainty in the form, but again, this uncertainty is made operational *in time* as the form of the work unfolds through further distinctions are drawn, selections are made, and observations are communicated. Thus the work of art acts recursively, allowing for multiple observations, some of which may question its own conditions of possibility without thereby undermining the continuity of its form.[11]

b. The Question Again: When is Art?

Goodman asks the question 'when is art?' in order to clarify how a theory of symbols might take account of a change in the status of art following the introduction of the 'found object' and 'so-called 'conceptual art'', where it becomes obvious that no one set of properties or functions can give an exhaustive description of those objects that achieve this status.[12] Arguably, this account requires further development in light of the expanded and broadly theatrical status of works such as Sehgal's and the problems of construction and temporality raised by them.[13] Goodman's constructive 'irrealism' certainly remains pertinent here, because it is evident that the works under discussion do not require a 'real world' reference in order to carry out their worldmaking

[11] Arguably, this is not a recent accomplishment. See Alexander Nagel, and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 13.

[12] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 57.

[13] Works that are, as performances, 'given to disappear', to use Rebecca Schneider's phrase ('Performance Remains', *Performance Research* 6.2 [2001], 102), and yet which also recur through time, and so have what one might call *depth in time*.

operations.[14] It is curious, however, that in answering this question, Goodman dismisses self-reference as 'too rare and idiosyncratic to carry any weight'.[15] It is, for him, simply a special case of depiction whereby the symbol refers internally.

Yet it seems that we must reconsider self-reference, if only because the five symptoms of the aesthetic that Goodman identifies do not appear to account for what is done by a work such as *This Objective of That Object*.[16] As a symbol, such a work is fictional, which is to say that it is a representation with null denotation, but in a quite singular sense. We could describe it as a '*This Objective of That Object*-work', but that only begs the question. The title suggests that the work operates in the mode of the factual—the positing of *this* and *that*—as much as the fictional.[17] This is a shift from different modes of representation, then, to construction through fiction. But for there to be something referred to by this positing of *this* and *that* requires that the work refers to itself. In other words, it cannot be a predicate for itself until it posits *this* or *that* as a reference, and this requires the distribution of re-entered observations, as described above.

The work does not function here as expression. We might describe what it does as exemplification, in the sense that the work both possesses and refers back to the label, to use Goodman's term, that denotes it.[18] But then of what is the work an example? What does it exhibit, typify, and show forth? It might possess any number of properties to which it refers and selects for observation, of course, but, primarily at least, what it appears to exhibit and exemplify is itself—the property of being *this objective* and *that object*. Exemplification is controversial as a symptom of the work of art and I am not going to pursue it in any detail here, other than to say that, in response to Margolis, by acting self-referentially, it is indeed possible for a work of art to present itself as an example.[19] In fact, if exemplification presupposes, problematically, an intention to exemplify, then it is, perhaps, precisely by the instruction to construct through self-reference that a work of art performs such an intention.

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[14] Nelson Goodman, 'Notes on the Well-Made World', *Erkenntnis*, vol. 19, no. 1/3 (1983), 106.

[15] 'The cases cited are, of course, quite special ones, and the analogues among pictures—that is, pictures that are pictures of themselves or include themselves in what they depict can perhaps be set aside as too rare and idiosyncratic to carry any weight'; Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 60.

[16] Ibid. 67. The five symptoms are (1) synactic density, (2) semantic density, (3) relative repleteness, (4) exemplification, and (5) multiple and complex reference. For an earlier list of four symptoms, without (5), see Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 252-255.

[17] Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art*, translated by J. Gaines and M. Turnbull, (Zurich/Dijon: JRP Ringier/Les presses du reel, 2010), 164.

[18] As Goodman claims, exemplification is 'possession plus reference'; *Languages of Art*, 53.

[19] See Joseph Margolis, 'What is When? When is What? Two Questions for Nelson Goodman', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 39, no. 3, Spring (1981), 267.

Remember the repeated phrase that demonstrates the 'intention' of the work: 'The objective of this work is to become the object of discussion'. It is possible that such recursive observations will be easier to attribute to the work of art itself when it takes human performers as its medium.

In conclusion, we must return to how this brief consideration of self-reference and recursion might answer the question of 'when is art?' It is tempting to propose these two as additional 'symptoms' for Goodman's tentative list. That might be enough. But what Sehgal's works demonstrate is that the recursive construction of the work that self-reference enables becomes necessary once it is a question of works distributed and organised without adherence to the conventional specifications of medium and without producing any*thing* in particular. If such a work is not to disappear in the communications that it consists of, then it must in some way recur in these communications over time. This is precisely what self-referential observations of re-entry achieve, enabling something such as children's play, whatever and whenever else it might be, to become the object of communication about itself and to function symbolically for a given time as a work of art in a way that also allows for its players to participate in the construction of that work. Thus, in a way that remains legible within Goodman's account of 'when is art?', an understanding of recursive form allows us to describe what distinguishes aesthetic works in time.

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