

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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PROGRESS PERFORMED

DAVID EVERITT HOWE

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One of two works in Tino Sehgal's recent exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York featured one male and one female actor, straddling one another on the museum's rotunda. As they changed positions, his hand reaching up her back or her face grazing his, artists Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly recorded the movement comprising *The Kiss* (2006) in real time. The performance was—unsurprisingly, considering Sehgal's past as a dancer—rather tightly choreographed. The artists' auditory score of the work sounds something like this: "Her right knee on floor standing on left foot, his left knee on floor standing on right foot, facing each other, his right hand around back of her neck..." At that time, Gerard and Kelly were completing the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, and found the work's gender-specific pronouns problematic. They re-performing the work at Volta Art Fair, among other locations, using a couple or trio of homosexual males, re-titled *You Call This Progress?* (2010).

This same score is the foundation for the artists' most recent work, performed at The Kitchen in New York. *Ideological Formation* (2010) opened with Gerard and Kelly's recorded Sehgal score, played over the black box sound-system. Three variously sized, mass-produced white boxes lay on a bare stage, two of them concealing dancers. Moving across the floor and interacting on stage, the two boxes finally tipped over and two dancers spilled out. The choreography that followed integrated simple, pedestrian movements, militaristic drills, and gestures that evoked voguing. About midway through the dance, the sound of Kelly's voice reading the score was overwhelmed by Madonna's song "Material Girl," inflecting the work with the pop star's paean to consumerism and materialism. The queer politics that marked *You Call This Progress?* were here broadened, vis-à-vis a Minimalist vernacular, to question the confluences of identity, capitalism, and commodification.

Gerard and Kelly will perform the work, in elaborated form, at the Mount Tremper Arts Festival August 13 and 14. I sat down with the collaborators to discuss the work in relationship to Minimalism, capitalism, and spectacle.

DAVID EVERITT HOWE: Tell me about the Minimalist references in your work—the white boxes, the Trisha Brown-like choreography, etc.

BRENNAN GERARD: The boxes are an explicit reference to Robert Morris' dance pieces, and the choreography of early Judson Church: Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, etc. At the very beginning Robert Morris and Simone Forti were married. The legend is that she gave Robert Morris all his ideas, because she was really into props, specifically boxes. She did a piece called *Roller Boxes* (1961), where the dancers were in boxes on wheels with ropes attached, and they screamed while being spun around. Then she did *Accompaniment for La Monte's "2 sounds"* (1961), where the dancer was tied up in rope, and then just unwound and wound again. Later he started working with boxes, incorporating them into performances, and then it wasn't until years later that he put the boxes in the gallery—not until long after he'd done this Judson stuff.

RYAN KELLY: And Trisha Brown's choreography. Which is something that we're kind of pushing more in this elaboration of *Ideological Formation* that we're working on for Mount Tremper.

HOWE: Are you still going to play [my favorite] Madonna song, "Material Girl"?

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KELLY: Well, we were thinking about these claims of immateriality that are made around performance practice as of late. And thinking specifically about Marina Abramovic's statement at the completion of her exhibition: that "art should be and will be more and more immaterial." And we wonder what the stakes are of that. Hopefully when we use that song we call up the stakes: the complete identification of the performer/performance artist with his or her body, with his or her self in an autonomous way, versus the idea of the kind of construction where something can exist outside of the body or outside the self. This is the case in the choreography of a postmodern dancer like Yvonne Rainer—that you can achieve this distance between the performer and what is performed.

GERARD: For me, a performance has a material affect on the memory. I think it changes the way your brain works. And when you remember this performance, it has an impact on your thought processing which is physical. I mean from a neurological standpoint. And also, I don't think the performance exists in the moment that it's being performed; it exists more in the after-burn of memory. That's where it really happens: when you are remembering it. The actual "event" is just the kind of conditions necessary for the memory to happen. And this is a very conscious reversal of the present-this fetishism of the present. Because I don't think that, in that moment, that much happens. I think the cauldron is too hot. It's like the moment of the revolution, or the orgasm. Nothing actually happens there. But it's what happens in the memory of it that that's most affective. That it's not actually happening when it's happening. And I think there's a politics implied in this phenomenology: it's actually only in the memory of it, that it becomes a political project. So that saves you from that idea which I think is so elitist, which is: "you had to have been there," "you had to be there." Because what if I'm not there at the revolution because I'm working? What if I'm not there because I'm having sex, or sleeping? I don't think that you *have* to be there. And to me, it's more interesting what happens to the performance in the act of its memory. A lot of people talk about the communist revolution, or the Paris commune—but in fact, it's over. This moment of revolutionary potential is now over. We live in the era after the Paris commune. The Paris commune failed. But to go back to materiality, another thing that we're playing with is that when you think about Madonna in terms of Marina Abramovic—or in terms of creating a kind of materiality of performance—Madonna's very successful at that, at creating a product that is outside of her persona. And because the product kind of exists in the world, it preserves some degree of privacy-of a personal escape from the market.

KELLY: If you consider performance as an immaterial practice, there is no distinction, there is no distance: the performer is the body, the body is the commodity, the artist is the commodity. And I think this is something that Tino Sehgal understands, which is why he has enlisted participants who are willing to instrumentalize themselves. I think it's so he can have that distance from the body that performs, which is the commodity. And I think that's also why he can quickly commodify the work, and why Marina is still kind of wondering how that's possible.

HOWE: I think Sehgal is interesting because he elaborates on a 1990s strain of representation critique. You could put relational aesthetics on one side, which is this sort of utopian, outside position to capitalism. And in his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud thinks of this participatory movement as a Marxist push-back against spectacle-spectacle in a Debordian sense. On the other side, you have artists that worked within capitalism. You could say Phillipe Vergne's "Let's Entertain" exhibition is a good example of this kind contrary kind of idea, as it exhibited artists or collaboratives like Bernadette Corporation who produce spectacle, and use the tropes of Hollywood, in a way that revels in it while trying to locate potentials for criticality. Of course, in a way that's not positioned as exterior to, or outside of, the market. I mean, a lot of critics have a problem with relational aesthetics—Claire Bishop and Sven Lütticken immediately come to mind. And for good reason, I think. It's kind of idealistic, maybe naïve. That's the general consensus. Not that it's not a good indicator of the kind of work being made at the time. So you have artists like Pierre Huyghe who do the inverse, and like I said before, embrace the system we're in. He made a great video, *The Third Memory* (2000), in which he juxtaposes this Hollywood representation of a real-life bank robbery with the "real life" bank robber recounting the

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events. There's a great essay called "No Ghost" which talks about this, and scholar Tom McDonough points out that the bank robbery, in real life, was inspired by Hollywood movies. So it's this strange media tautology-the point being that this guy, John Wojtowicz, conceived of the robbery in relation to these other films. And he'll slip into this cinematic rhetoric as if there's no difference there: cinema constitutes real life as cinema.

GERARD: Yeah, I think Bernadette Corporation is very interesting, as they sort of insist upon the product outside of one's self. So that one can kind of make a living without necessarily constant self-exploitation.

HOWE: You know, Bernadette Corporation really enjoyed the fashion line: they wanted to be critical of corporations, fashion, the economy, but they also wanted to make money. They sold their clothes at Steven Alan downtown. Of course, their fashion line was when they first started, but they were very aware of this paradoxical position. They tried to do both, essentially.

GERARD: Ryan and I just read [theorist] Isabelle Graw's essay "When Life Goes to Work: Andy Warhol." She claims that Warhol is really the first artist to exploit his position in a neoliberal, biopolitical world. Where the market has infiltrated every aspect of our lives. He was the first artist to negotiate this new paradigm, but also resisting it simultaneously, and she talked a lot about *how* he resisted-this idea of the "product" versus the "person." Warhol maintained that separation. Even though he very much was a persona, and even though he was on the scene and participating, there was always a product that was outside of him. But in this new art market, which is highly personalized, and really fetishistic of the artist's presence, Graw says the problem is when the artist can no longer have a product that's outside the person. Warhol was in the Factory, was still doing the silk-screening, he was still doing all of this stuff. Even his performances felt like products, because they were all about wigs, and accoutrements, and this whole play with distance. And Graw's saying he was able to preserve some level of-and maybe this is conservative what she's saying-but some level of interiority or privacy, or something that's not available to the consumer or to the market.

HOWE: I don't think that's possible. I don't believe you can salvage the subject any longer, particularly when it's in large part formed and constituted by the market-by spectacle. As Claire Fontaine has said, "Guy Debord is dead," and I think resistance is a rhetorical no-go.

KELLY: Well, I think these are the stakes of materiality, if we can think this through. Maybe performance doesn't have to be complicit with the market. Perhaps there's a way of finding resistance within it, and resistance only to the extent that you can carve out...I mean there is no space outside of the market, but maybe can you hide...within it?

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