

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

interventions

TOUCHING ON REUSABLE PARTS/ENDLESS LOVE

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A single dancer is at the far end of the stage, obscured from the entrance sightline by white wall-like rolling partitions. Wearing yellow wireless headphones, he (or she?) speaks into a standing microphone phrases describing the interaction of lovers, "left hand on right thigh", "his hand grazes her cheek", and "they kiss". At times he stumbles over phrases or mumbles nonsense. The pacing speeds as he anticipates the end of some phrases, slows with uncertainty, and pauses dead during silence.

He puts down the headphones and walks over to an adjacent area on the other side of one of the white walls. The audience shifts. Some only have to turn their heads from a central standing position. Others scramble to their feet, duck behind the wall, and settle into a crouches closest to the dancer, or linger at the perimeter of the tiered seating. Next his voice comes over out amplified from above, playing the recording of the words he spoke a few minutes ago. Now he dances, following his own words as instructions for movement, acting out the part of two lovers, both at once, grazing his own cheek, kissing the back of his hand.

Concurrently, a second dancer fitted with headphones steps forth to another microphone and recites the same phrases, his voice falling in and out of synchrony with the amplified recording of Dancer 1. At the end of the cycle, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 shift spaces, and begin to dance again, each following his own voice. Much of the crowd does not notice as Dancer 3 steps up to another mike to repeat the process.

...And so begins *Reusable Parts/Endless Love*, a dance performance by artists Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly, presented at Dancespace, November 10-12, 2011. Over seventy-two minutes, six parts emerge, each an interpretation of a dance score based on a live audio recording of the artists' verbal observations of viewing Tino Sehgal's *Kiss* (2002). The audience never hears the original recording, only translations from the dancers' lips. While the voices and recordings of additional dancers accumulate with each part, the fourth part reintroduces the verbal observation as score, with Dancer 4 describing the movements of the first three dancers into the microphone, to be replayed next. In the fifth part, two of the dancers perform this new score as a duet, effectively merging three bodies into two, while two others record their observations into microphones. For the sixth and final part, the audience hears only foot shuffles and heavy breaths, as the newly recorded score is only audible to the dancers, who each perform it as a solo.

Throughout this densely layered performance, one can parse together fragments of Jean-Luc Nancy's understanding of the dynamics of human interaction and community as offered in his 1982 essay *The Inoperative Community*. Nancy opposes the conventional understanding of community as an all-inclusive and harmonious group, instead proposing community as always already present in all human interactions, complete with friction and misunderstanding. The example of lovers feature prominently in Nancy's text and represent the extreme limit of human interaction or community. It is the lovers' "co-appearance" to the eyes of the community, their unleashing of passions and the extremity of their sharing that exposes to the community its own edge of interrelatedness. The intimacy of their touch, perfectly packaged in the kiss, nonetheless falls short of complete union. Gerard and Kelly render the relationship between the artists and audience as that of lovers to community and the performance process as an unworking of that community. One will always fall short in knowing the other, and yet this relation to the other, this incompleteness, this dislocation, is precisely what constitutes the singular being. For Nancy, the

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community unworks, that is to say that it does not operate or work smoothly, and representations of the community that do not account for this messy process of unworking are misguided.

In that Nancy refers to unworking as “before or beyond the work”, an encounter with “interruption, fragmentation, suspension”, it is crucial not only to consider the performance as such, but also its engagement with what is adjacent to it, what it rubs up against, what it touches.^[1] The printed program note points towards art historical precedents, the political situation of the day (the allusion to Occupy Wall Street), and the problem of tokenism in representations of identity. Here, the artists’ thoughtfully considered chain of references sheds light on the performance’s process of un-working. *Reusable Parts* is a remake of, or on their own words, “a tonic to”, their previous performance, *You Call This Progress?*, a performance created in response to the exclusively heterosexual pairings of Tino Sehgal’s *Kiss*, which itself borrows from art historical sources.

To unravel this chain of references, we begin with Tino Sehgal’s *Kiss*, which gained great media attention as part of the artist’s solo exhibition at the Guggenheim in early 2010. Centrally located in the august Wright rotunda, *Kiss* presented male/female pairs languorously maneuvering their bodies, shifting from one embrace to another. Their entwined limbs passed through familiar romantic poses of popular culture and art history, most notably Auguste Rodin’s eponymous 1889 marble sculpture, repeating the sequence approximately every twelve minutes. At the prescribed time, a second couple would slip into the movement sequence, performing alongside the first couple as the first pair finished their sequence and saunter off, melting into the crowd with their street clothes.

You Call This Progress? featured male dancers re-performing the loop of Tino Sehgal’s *Kiss* at Burning Bridges and Volta Art Fair in the spring of 2010, on the heels of the Guggenheim exhibition. The sarcasm of the title, *You Call This Progress?* critiques the heteronormativity of Sehgal’s casting of only male/female pairings, which is highlighted by the cast’s ethnic diversity. The artists rotated dancers within the pairs and introduced threesomes, representing an alternative non-traditional sexuality and promiscuity. Despite sharing the same score and seed as *Reusable Parts*, *You Call This Progress?* differed markedly. At times, dancers broke character, directly addressing the audience with announcements about how long they had rehearsed and how much they had been paid for their work.^[2] The audio recording from the Guggenheim was played the entire time, which had the effect of reinforcing Sehgal’s “originating” role. While it may be tempting to view *Reusable Parts* as an extended *You Call This Progress?*, and/or as a narrow critique of Sehgal’s heteronormativity, as did Claudia LaRocco in her Times review, this type of response willfully ignores the subtlety of Gerard and Kelly’s exploration of human interrelatedness.^[3]

Crucial to understanding the artists’ more ambivalent take on Sehgal in *Reusable Parts* is how they use his work as a score. The *Reusable Parts* score is more akin to the Fluxus event score, which encourages creative interpretation with iterations often acting as playful complements to a precursor, than a traditional music or dance score, which aims to communicate instructions. The use of the event score as working method, or better said, an un-working method, alleviates the too frequently employed “you-and-me-against-the-world model” of much politically engaged work, (which they seem to hint they may have employed in *You Call This Progress?*, and perhaps explains the need to revisit the piece).^[4] Gerard and Kelly seem to acknowledge indebtedness to Sehgal’s radical use of the museum’s gallery architecture and its cultural context as a space for dance, while keeping distance that a straight homage does not afford. It is worth mentioning that the first performance of *Reusable Parts* occurred in a museum setting at the University Art Gallery, University of California Irvine, February 5, 2011, as part of the exhibition “The Cult of Ruin: Strategies of Accumulation”. In the Dancespace iteration, *Reusable Parts* addressed architecture in the reverse manner of the February performance and to Sehgal’s Guggenheim exhibition. Instead of bringing dance into a gallery space, Brennan and Gerard brought the gallery into a dance space.

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While Sehgal is certainly not the first artist choreographer to bring dance into the museum gallery space, his moratorium on reproducing the work in any fashion, specifically at a time when museums are forced to accept (albeit inconsistently) the pervasiveness of digital imaging technologies as a tool of the public, indicates a strong engagement with debates about the current state of hyper-mediatisation. We will later address Gerard and Kelly's undertaking of the ubiquity of mediation.[5]

Not only the use of the score, but also repetitive unit-based choreography, (think reusable parts), is an attempt to "tame their subjective desires" so that the choreography operates as "coolly and analytically" as a machine to "destabilize representational order ...from hierarchical to horizontal." This is where Gerard and Kelly incorporate the tactics of what has been called minimalist dance to curtail the author function and spotlight the incidental. This is in many ways an antidote to highly regulated power structure between artist/choreographer and performers employed by a great deal of performance art situated in museums lately, including not only Sehgal's work, but also Marina Abramovic's recent endeavors.

Another key element of the performance's unworking are sightlines, visual blockages, and spatial gaps crafted among the multiple performers, between performers and audience, and of the audience fractured among itself, never perceptible as a whole. The audience is invited to walk about the space or sit within it during the performance, and at times dancers are positioned on opposite sides of partitions, forcing the audience to choose which dancer to watch. Nancy touches on the importance of visibility of interrelatedness to the process of unworking when he writes, "Communication consists... in the appearance of the between as such: you and I (between us)—a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition." [6] Here the act of watching—watching performers watching each other, watching them watch the audience, watching the audience watch itself—is equal to witnessing exposure, thus reinforcing the action of communication.

Reusable Parts/Endless Love highlights the audience members' awareness of his or her own body in relation other bodies as complicated by the architectural infrastructure of art eschewing conventions of both the stage and the white cube. The work's staging is carefully considered, creating sightlines similar to those of a museum or gallery setting, proposing dancer's bodies – and perhaps even other audience members' bodies – as sculptural forms. The effect is akin to Dan Graham's post-minimal performance works such as *Performer, Audience, Mirror* (1977) and *Public Space/Two Audiences* (1976), in which the public sees itself – as part of a larger social body – looking at art, thus recognizing its behavior as an adherence to social convention. As the dancers roll the partitions into different configurations throughout the piece, blocking certain viewers' perspectives and opening up others, point of view is literally and metaphorically accentuated as singular but also plural, one of many.

In *Reusable Parts/Endless Love*, much as in Nancy's scenario, distance and proximity become charged with meaning. The audience's proximity to dancers changed over time; the circles they form around performers contract and disperse. Some spectators angle in between less active viewers, neck careering out to capture every movement. Others perch above, standing on the stadium seats, taking the performance in at bird's eye view. Within this context, an individual spectator's attention to a particular dancer assumes the character of bewitched lover. That is to say the seduction of an audience at work in performance took on a heightened romantic tenor.

Reusable Parts functions more in the spirit of an avant-garde Rodin—the maker of early sculptures of fragmented bodies writhing in ecstasy, the ultimate part-objects —than of that of the craftsman of the later legendary *Kiss*. Sehgal's family friendly performance, taking up iconic romantic gestures from Hollywood and executed with smooth meticulousness, aptly approaches the kitsch of its namesake. While *Reusable Parts'* frank, idiosyncratic, at times hermaphroditic (dancers at times take on the challenge of playing both lovers at once), portrayal of lovers in rapture does not have the context of Victorian mores against which to rebel, it does provide a

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rebellious alternative to the hetero-normative narratives of romantic love of Sehgal's *Kiss*, and mass media at large.

Reusable Parts/Endless Love registers distance not only through physical space between bodies, but also through points of communication, with multiple nodes of mediation and transmission: Tino Sehgal's original choreography, the voice recording (unheard by the audience), the multiple dancers' re-speaking of the recording, the dancers' on-the-spot descriptions of the concurrent dance, and the layering of voices. Although the program explains the choreographic method in concise terms, the audience's experience of the performance is nonetheless that of decoding the movements and sounds within the system, but always at a slight remove. The phrase spoken by each dancer at various times, "he is about to look over his shoulder" registers both temporal and communicative distance, baring both the weight of anticipation and the remove of descriptive narration. The words the dancers speak are not only descriptive of a past unavailable performance, but also function as self-directed instruction. "She draws her hand across his face" one dancer announces, hurriedly brushing his own cheek, a tenth of a second late, like a digital slip, slightly asynchronous. Distance as mediation is also featured through the dual systems of feedback, as both technological operation (the recording of a recording) and as cultural operation (the effect that media depictions of romantic love have on society, which in turn effects how society creates new cultural products).

Indeed, *Reusable Parts/Endless Love* is highly attuned to our contemporary mode of living (and experiencing art) through a thick fog of competing and mediated translations; that is to say in a constant state of information overload. This hyper-mediated condition in turn affects our bodily unconscious, in particular how we filter perceptions, register time, focus attention, and ultimately, how we communicate. Instead of attempting to isolate the experience of art, Gerard and Kelly celebrate its multiple manifestations, translations, and distortions.

The repetition in *Reusable Parts/Endless Love* is the most crucial underlying factor to Gerard and Kelly's unworking of interrelatedness. The revisiting of *The Kiss*, in its many iterations—that of Rodin, Sehgal, and *You Call This Progress?*—is a continual deferral of completion. While the performance may always remain partial, it also looks forward in that it acts as a call awaiting response. In the spirit of unworking the endless, it insists on its peculiarities, fragmentation, and its instances of vision and occlusion. As does this essay, in an attempt to touch on, which is to say, merely scratch the surface of a rich and complex artwork. The last line of the *Reusable Parts/Endless Love* program note, and also the last line of Nancy's essay, provides the appropriately ambiguous and incomplete answer to their call: We can only go farther.

[1] Nancy, Jean Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, pg. 31.

[2] The labor conditions of gallery/museum setting performance and the relationship between "performance art" and the market were a major concerns of *You Call This Progress?*, and also of *Reusable Parts*, although in a more oblique manner, which this essay does not have room to explore.

[3] LaRocco, Claudia. "Returning One Kind of Kiss With a Kiss-Off," *The New York Times*. November 14, 2011.

[4] *Reusable Parts/Endless Love* program note

[5] Gerard and Kelly know well the work of Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer and others associated with "minimalist dance" who emerged in the 1960s and were pioneered this method.

[6] *The Inoperative Community*, p. 29.

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