Performance Post Lockdown: Tino Sehgal et al in Down to Earth at Gropius Bau

In an era of social distancing, an exhibition about ecology turns into a meditation on human connections. Michal B. Ron reviews the recent “Down to Earth” exhibition at Gropius Bau.

Critique / Michal B. Ron December 10, 2020

It has been a while since I attended institutional exhibitions. First museums and galleries closed due to COVID-19, then the kindergarten closed for summer break … I am happy that the first exhibition I’ve visited was *Down to Earth. Climate Art Discourse unplugged* at Gropius Bau: a group show that demonstrates what exhibitions can do to, and with, visitors. An important demonstration in the age of social distancing and virtual viewing rooms – an exhibition the visitor should experience in space, there, live.

The exhibition’s list of artists includes big names such as Kader Attia, Andreas Gursky, Alicja Kwade, Tomás Saraceno, and Tino Sehgal (who is also one of the curators), next to star theoreticians Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, all gathered together to get the public engaged in a *Climate Art Discourse unplugged*. Only for a short month, the ground floor of Gropius Bau hosted different works, which occupied/ invaded their spaces like inhabiting ecosystems. In the atrium, we confront Lee Mingwei’s *Guernica in Sand*, a performance piece that actually belongs to a series of rituals Gropius Bau hosts, but it nonetheless befits wonderfully the exhibition around it: this is where Pablo Picasso’s iconic 1937 *Guernica* has been recreated monumentally with 28 tonnes of sand. Later it was all wiped, erased and swirled when, in the opening event, the audience was invited to walk over the work, transforming Picasso’s expressive cubism into a Willem de Kooning-like abstract expressionist work, or perhaps transforming war’s trauma into a post-war Greenbergian aesthetic manifestation.

While we might ask about the ecological economy of transporting 28 tonnes of sand into the museum, Asad Raza’s *Absorption* grants us a response: the artist fills the museum’s floor with soil from the immediate surroundings of Brandenburg, and fellow performers-gardeners carefully attempt to fertilize it with organic and inorganic materials. A human endeavor to keep the healthy balance of the soil, artificially, or better say, humanly, as a goal in itself – that is, not intended for further exploitation. The visitors may take soil with them, for their own use, so tells us the performer-gardener watering the soil. I could imagine the *finissage*, evacuating the work and spreading it into many homes, labs and gardens around Berlin, leaving the museum clean again. Until then, despite the subversive temptation to leave brown soil footprints all over the sterile museum’s halls, the guard instructs us to make sure to wipe the soil off our shoes before entering the next room. Well, I was wearing my not-for-the-playground pair of sneakers, so I was fine with this, too. A side effect of the work is getting museum-goers shoes dirty.

4.jpg



[1]Asad Raza, Absorption, 2020, Courtesy of the artist. The work was created as a Kaldor Public Art Project and first shown in Sydney in 2019. Installation view Down to Earth. Climate Art Discourse Unplugged, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020
© Berliner Festspiele

We then meet with the contribution of Tomás Saraceno, who is Berlin artworld's spiderman: an open letter from spiders, who could finally flourish during the time the museum was closed, asking the younger minority – the human species – to tolerate their presence as an older majority on this earth. Or in their words, allegedly translated into English from web vibrations: “We have lived on earth for more than 380 million years, while some of you humans, only 200 thousand years. Can the minority learn to live with the majority of us?” There is a mirror in the room, directed at the ceiling’s corner, where you might see a developed web if you find the right angle that does not include your own human reflection.

1.jpg **[2]**



[3]
Tomás Saraceno, Untitled, 2020
Title: Invertebrate Rights for “Down to Earth”
Year: 13.82020 billion, ABB (After Big Bang)
Co-Author: Spider/webs, Holocnemus Pluchei & Tomás Saraceno, a founding member of Arachnophilia
Edition: Still ongoing but threatened
Material: Dome Spider/Web endemic to Gropius Bau sensed and felt at 1-300 Hz, sunlight, air, mirror, open letter.
Dimensions: Variable.
Diet: Please do not feed us, we eat just about anything caught in our webs, including wasps, mosquitos, large jumping spiders. We survive pandemics.
Installation view Down to Earth. Climate Art Discourse unplugged, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020 Berliner Festspiele/Immersion. Photo: Eike Walkenhorst

As a prelude to Tino Sehgal’s work, music fills the space. Walking through the rooms we finally discover musicians from the STEGREIF.orchester. The musicians of this group always play without notes, without a conductor, without chairs. Unplugged – their music is to be experienced there, in the musical space created inside the museum. A clever move for a musical performance within the regulations of social distancing – getting the listener en passage, in a big hall, with the windows open.

2.jpg **[4]**



[5]Stehgreif Orchester. Down to Earth. Climate Art Discourse unplugged, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020
Berliner Festspiele/Immersion
Photo: Eike Walkenhorst

Tino Sehgal's performance pieces are never recorded or documented. We enter "A Situation" where a group of performers discusses short quotes regarding conversation. "In…, someone said …" announces one of the performers, to which another responds. Their aural articulations come through quite clearly, whereas their body language is somehow slowed down, taking time in expressing banal movements such as moving the hand through one's hair in a gesture that implies thinking, pondering, considering. "People who say they are good listeners are often not good listeners at all," says another performer, causing us all in the room to laugh, performers and listeners alike. Who is a good listener? The one hmm-hmmming back at you, perhaps blocking your speech? The one saying, "I understand exactly what you mean" and repeats this "I" "I" "I" over and over again, claiming to hear you? The listener summarizing what you have just said (a performer says that a psychiatrist once recommended that he should do so in conversations), or perhaps the silent listener, zoning out from time to time – is he or she actually the one yielding space to the speaker? A performer (I think it was the one wearing a sweater with a Minnie Mouse pattern, who has caught my attention outside the museum before entering, possibly while taking his coffee break) confessed that at the end of conversations, where he would actually zone out quite often, the speaker would tell him how great it was to speak to someone like him, who actually listened … What a great conversation it was! And we, the listeners, are we being viewed in "this situation"? The performers look at us, straight in the eye, saying in unison: "Welcome to this situation." The gesture almost makes me burst into tears. When was the last time an artwork looked me in the eye? Or a stranger?

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[7]The performer’s sweater looked something like this one.

I’ve experienced Sehgal’s piece before, in his 2015 big solo show at the same institution, yet it acquires a new power in the post-lockdown era, pre-possible quarantine that seems to await everyone just around the corner. Sharing a space with fellow human beings, in a piece that cannot be “Zoomed,” which we won’t find online, which Netflix cannot purchase. There were moments when sitting in Sehgal’s piece felt similar to binge-watching “Love on the Spectrum” on Netflix for example, where, too, the components of a conversation were broken down into details and studied, to be later implemented on a successful date, for the purpose of “finding common interests.” Whenever Sehgal’s performers “welcomed” me to another “situation” I was tempted to stay just for another “situation,” and another one, and another, before leaving. Did I get used to passively watching human interactions on screens, or with mediation?

From the ecological perspective, Sehgal’s works prove to be the most efficient: they demand nothing but the performers themselves. No imported materials, no carbon print, no objects, no waste. Just us

humans, interacting, and now with a safe distance and an open window.1

The exhibition continues with rather optimistic, or, let's say, productive views of our possible interactions with our environment. It is not a doomsday show, warning us against global warming. Perhaps such depressing attitudes would be less appealing within the pandemic reality. Bruno Latour, for example, creates together with Frédérique Aït-Touati a "working room" for building the scenography for a theater play dramatizing a philosophy conference. There, with the help of mediators, he also encourages the visitors to imagine new ways to get "down to earth" and establish new relations with it. Not to "re-indigenousize" oneself (what would be terribly wrong, assuming the cliche about primitivized exotic fantasies of indigenous people living "close to nature"), but use the imagination to create something different, something new. "Where to land?" is the leading question.

We are welcomed into the laboratory room by a fellow who talks about the fact that we – life – inhabit only a "Critical Zone:" the thin layer of several kilometers above and below the earth's surface, not more. "Oh, so our world is flat!" I come to realize. Acknowledging the "Critical Zone" is as shocking as discovering that the earth circles the sun and not the other way around, tells us the fellow. "If the world turns around, how would God find me?" asks a cardinal confronting Galileo Galilei. We are invited to use some paper and pencil to express our imagination, to describe the ways we are connected to land. I am pregnant again, so I draw a happy embryo who is connected to land through his mother's vagina and leg. My partner in this museum visit draws arrows going up and down, and explains: this is an elevator. Because we are connected or are affected from beyond this thin surface. I draw some fertilizers for the embryo, in the form of a flower and a bee and a tree spreading seeds in spring. My partner draws some shells. It is difficult to reply to such an assignment within the spontaneity of a museum's visit, but hopefully our contribution could help Latour and his crew further.

3.jpg **[8]**



[9]Installation view Down to Earth. Climate Art Discourse unplugged, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020

Andreas Gursky
Antarctic (2010)
Wallpaper
Courtesy Atelier Andreas Gursky / Courtesy Sprüth Magers

Andreas Gursky
Ocean II, VI (2010)
Wallpaper
Courtesy Atelier Andreas Gursky / Courtesy Sprüth Magers

Kirsten Pieroth
Berliner Pfütze (Neukölln) (2020)
Courtesy the artist
Berliner Festspiele/Immersion. Photo: Eike Walkenhorst

We end our visit with shorter impressions. I must soon head back to pick up my girl from the kindergarten, and my friend heads to the library, where one must be lucky to get a spot reserved in Corona times. Andreas Gursky's grand photographic satellite images *Antarctic* and *Ocean II*, *VI,* both created in 2010, seem now like old politics. Artworks from the past order of exhibition viewing, when the work hangs on the wall and the viewer stands in front of it, viewing. Kirsten Pieroth's *Berliner Pfütze* (Neukölln), which is in the same room since it too deals with water, is much more exciting, it is touching: the artist transported a puddle from my neighborhood Neukölln, which is not the cleanest in the city, to put it gently, into the museum. The local, being here and now, is much more

moving, much more acute, than the distanced view from far away and above. Perhaps this also holds true for today's art world.

- 1. Sehgal is also known for his refusal to travel by airplane. When he visited America, he traveled by boat (years before Great Thunberg was old enough to make this decision for herself). In 2012 he explained to Lauren Collins that he wanted "to explore the notion of whether it [the market] might be able to traffic in something other than material goods," as the reporter put it. Lauren Collins, "The Question Artist: Tino Sehgal's provocative encounters [10]," *The New Yorker* (6 August 2012). See also Dorain Batcya's satirical column for April fools 2019 in *Hyperallergic* that announced: "After a Lifetime of Rejecting Technology, Artist Tino Sehgal Falls in Love with Instagram [11].''

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