



The situation now

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I’m reading a text on a projected rectangle of light. ‘They talk abut [sic] how to change the world then move on’, it tells me. I read a bit more while new little black letters creep across the white projected square. ‘She prefers loose comfortable [sic] clothing. Mostly dark.’ Hang on, I think ... that’s me the text is referring to. I look over to the young woman typing behind a laptop computer on the desk just inside the next door of the gallery at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. I smile at her, nod and laugh. The creeping words write: ‘She acknowledges with humorous response.’ I’m part of Dora Garcíá’s *Instant narrative*, 2006–08 project, which creates an interactive, real-time story out of the circumstance of the gallery’s visitors and their behaviour. I am subject, protagonist and even author in this event in which my presence prompts a written account, my role is central and my recognition of the situation makes me activate authorial response. I am in collaboration with the intent of the absent artist, the present ‘writer’, and myself.

The writer, I discover through conversation, is artist Deniz Ünal. She’s been asked by Garcíá to react and write throughout this particular Sunday. Others do it on other days. Talking with Ünal is an expected part of the *Instant narrative*, another form of the story. She is not hidden, but visible, like a CCTV camera. However, unlike the ubiquitous surveillance equipment, Ünal is available to the protagonist to interrogate their mutual position and situation if that is the choice. Some people don’t bother to interact, but Ünal thinks it’s nice when they do. We chat about the symbiosis of the event. Yes, Ünal tells me, many people, once they realise that they are the main focus of the text then attempt to influence what is written. Some dance, some ‘act out’. Of course, Ünal continues, she can decide not to engage with this. So

this project has something to do with control, as well of course as with surveillance. It clearly has issues of collaboration, but equally non-cooperation. Garcíá’s project is part of a travelling exhibition called ‘Double Agent’, so naturally one thinks about the switcheroony in this encounter of see-be-seen.

I am slightly bored by shows about surveillance. We have seen many variations on this theme, from Sophie Calle’s ATM videos, Julia Scher’s monitor works, to Ann-Sofie Sidén’s hotel peepshow and more. They are nearly as numerous as the real event itself. The shock of being subjectified and objectified by ‘Big Brother’ has been tamed and renamed as entertainment. What I find more interesting is that Garcíá’s project is part of a growing number of art events that are being bannered under the title ‘situations’. This has something to do with the fact that their interactivity with the audience, and their rupturing of the seamless and somewhat passive art/audience exchange in the traditional gallery, is loosely linked to ideas espoused in Guy Debord’s book *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and taken further into art by exponents of the Second Situationist International.

The ‘situations’ now, however, have blended the economic and political anarchy of the situationists with a sense of the uncanny moment to create a different type of encounter, one that is generally more inclusive and kinder to the audience, and perhaps less pompous or belligerent. These projects are often to do with relationships and exchange and – as Garcíá’s is – about making contact. Of course they do enter into the economic exchange debates, and make an attempt to interrogate the art as commodity with projects that are ephemeral, but newly a part of the art food chain. Galleries, obligingly, have become wise to this shift from object to encounter. It’s now possible, should the artist want it, for a gallery to purchase the ‘idea’.

Take as an example the £20,000 purchase by the Tate of Argentinian artist David Lamelas's project *Time*, 1970–, a situational work that invites members of the public to form a queue and ask each other the time. *Time* only exists when it is enacted. Journalists, who love this kind of conceptual art provocation, quipped at the time of the acquisition in 2005 that such a queue could be formed and found anywhere in London – on a tube station, at a bus stop, in a bank. But of course that is precisely the point. In the instance of real life, people queue for a purpose. Lamelas's project is closer to Beckett. The participants in *Time* enact and interrogate time, but wait for nothing. Like Beckett's tramps, they are in a kind of limbo. Pretty existential. In asking each person 'What time is it?', the participants have communicated and thought about their communal plight: the time discontinuum in which they are temporarily stuck.

The new situations' pin-up boy, Tino Sehgal, stages events which interrogate aesthetics, economics, evolution, eroticism and other ideas by creating controlled encounters that are performed by teams of trained mediators who survey or engage with gallery visitors, or remain stubbornly enclosed as a group against the interaction of the audience as they discourse on art. As with projects by Garciá and Lamelas, Sehgal is 'director' of these happenings rather than participant. There is a script, a set of probable answers and a bunch of choreographed movements that encircle the visitor in a seemingly spontaneous yet totally pre-planned inclusion zone. Sehgal's works, like Lamelas's, can be 'purchased'. In fact Sehgal makes it clear he thinks of his works as part of the distribution model. He is intensely interested in the economic monoculture that exists in the art world and what, in that world, can be seen as legitimate material capital.

New situations have started to emerge in the Australian art scene. Gabrielle de Vietri's performed interventions in 'NEW08', 'Arrivals and Departures', are less economically theoretical and more sociologically framed than Sehgal's, whose events remain closer to continental theory. De Vietri has asked her 'actors' to make small, slight gestures that are so subtle at times that they may go unnoticed by the occasional visitor. Her planned sequences of winks, huddles, waves, personal space interactions, people seeking imaginary objects and things, are similar to psychological experiments that test people's sociability tolerance levels. Slight though these movements and action are, they eventually accumulate to impress themselves on the visitor who might now notice they are implicated in patterns of behaviour.

Importantly, these artists do not see themselves and their works as 'performance' based, partly because they give such responsibility to the audience to complete the interaction. Sehgal is emphatic, in fact, that his works are part of the context of the gallery or museum rather than theatre; they need the history of the gallery to provide the expectation of exchange. Situations replace the passive two-dimensional, non-confrontational art piece with a problematic, often humorous encounter that remains in the memory of the audience. Fleeting maybe, yet profound, these events have a kind of cleansing purity about them – akin to when Martin Creed turns the lights off in the gallery so that we are left to contemplate potential again. I'm enjoying the situation now.

Double Agent, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 14 February – 6 April 2008; Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 26 April – 28 June 2008; **NEW08**, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 12 March – 11 May 2008.

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