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2 February 2015

Response by Agnieszka Gratza, 4 February 2015

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The first couple walked straight into the crowd gathered in front of the Henry Moore Institute on Victoria Gardens. The man reclines, his legs extended out on the cold stone pavement, as the woman starts advancing towards him on all fours. They have my attention from the word go. If only they were just kissing. But this is no chaste embrace. I guess they must be enacting for us a snapshot from Jeff Koons' explicit 1990-91 *Made in Heaven* series, starring the artist and his then wife, the Italian porn-star Ilona Staller known as La Cicciolina. In a *mise en abîme* of sorts, *Made in Heaven* references *ars amatoria* from the art historical canon – as does Tino Sehgal's 'Kiss' (2002), which is unfolding before us.

Noun and verb rolled into one, 'Kiss' is not 'The Kiss' as in the titles of well-known works by Auguste Rodin, Constantin Brancusi and Gustav Klimt, among others. The precise choreography of erotic movements is built around these iconic kisses, but does not end with them. 'Kiss' is not a series of staged *tableaux vivants*. The art historical allusions that it contains fleetingly come into focus, but are not frozen or reified as the definite article would suggest. The titular 'Kiss' can also be construed as an injunction.

Like a *tableau vivant*, 'Kiss' is largely silent. No sighing, gasping, heavy breathing or any other sounds of pleasure accompany the piece, though at times the lovers appear to swoon in ecstasy. At most, the couple jointly utters the name of artist, the title and date of the work, its institutional home or provenance. Since it was first created at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes in 2002, 'Kiss' has been installed in countless other places. It is owned by three institutions: the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto and the Fonds national d'art contemporain in France; Sehgal retains a fourth artist's proof.

In its present guise, 'Kiss' was produced with the Leeds-based Northern School of Contemporary Dance. Twelve dancers, who auditioned either as couples or on their own, were trained by Sehgal's long-term collaborator Frank Willens. Roughly the same age, the pairs look very different and bring their own stamp to the otherwise fixed routine that offers little scope for individual variation, let alone improvisation.

Face to face, with their arms tightly clasped around each other in a way that recalls Brancusi's starkly geometric stone carving 'The Kiss' (1907-8), the embracing pairs put me in mind of the original humans Aristophanes describes in Plato's *Symposium*. Each person had four legs, four hands, two heads, and rolled around like a ball, before the vengeful gods severed them in two. The two halves would spend all day embracing and clinging to each other in a pathetic attempt at regaining their lost unity until the gods took pity on them and endowed them with genitals. 'Love,' according to Aristophanes, is the name we give to our yearning for wholeness.

Whereas Aristophanes' Ur-humans come in three genders (male, female and androgynous), accounting for heterosexual and homosexual bonds alike, Sehgal's couples invariably consist of a male and female counterpart, as if purposely ignoring different sexual orientations. And yet, in a subtle comment on gender role reversals within a couple, the male and female partners swap roles at the end of each looping sequence, which lasts approximately ten minutes.

The couples carried on all night, in half-hour stints. These would get longer once 'Kiss' moved inside and the dancers no longer had to contend with the cold. (The piece has been staged outdoors before, but never in the dead of winter.) As 11am approached, the dancers started making their way towards the goods entrance on the side of Henry Moore Institute building, until they reached the very spot where Simone Forti's 'Slant Board' – the first event in *The Event Sculpture* series – was performed back in November. Traces of the other sculptural events could be seen and heard through the wide open doors. It remained for the dancers to collectively push up into the gallery the one couple that had been singled out to effect the seamless transition from outside to inside. 'Kiss' then took its place beside works by Simone Forti, Roman Signer and Lara Favaratto, the couples embracing until March 8 in a living, breathing sculpture that unfolds over time.