

139. *Untitled, 1997 (playtime)*. Installation at Museum of Modern Art, New York.



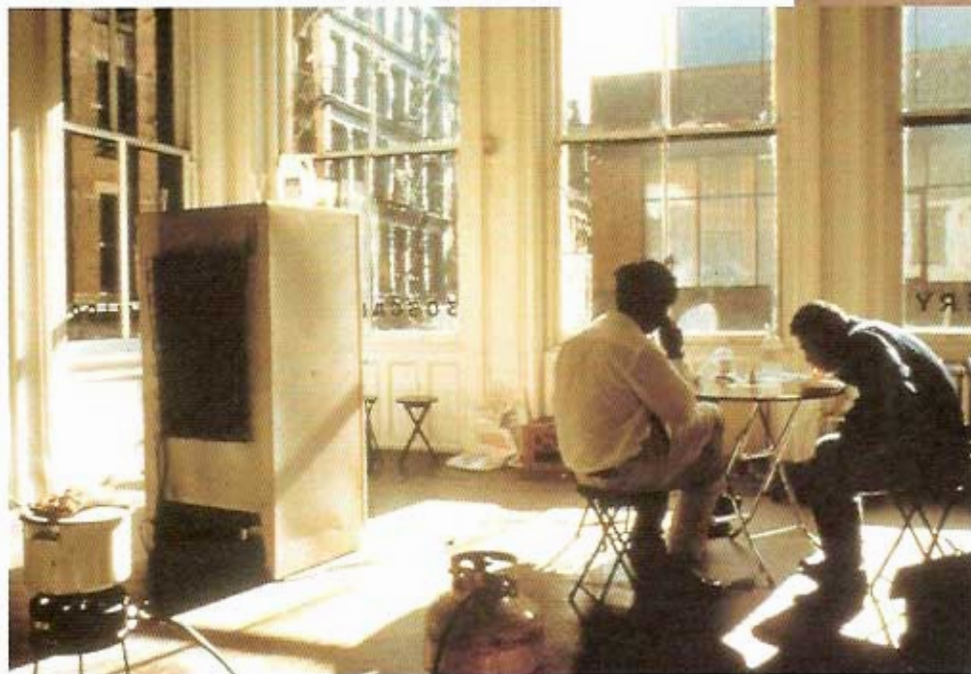
The difficulty of isolating Rirkrit Tiravanija's work from the continuum of daily life is one of its central effects. An impresario of the everyday, Tiravanija gracefully invites his audiences to do commonplace things such as eating, sleeping, playing, and relaxing, in situations staked out from unexpected spaces. Still, these unassuming situations do reveal a clear, if understated, vision for social exchange.

Tiravanija's most characteristic projects are based on his cooking and serving free food, usually Thai. For one of his best-known and earliest such events, *Untitled, 1992 (free)*, he inverted the usual art-gallery arrangement, moving the office apparatus and art storage into the gallery space, removing interior doors, and claiming the office as an improvised kitchen in which he served free

Thai green curry. This welcoming gesture disarmingly dislocated the commercial gallery structure, replacing commerce with an uncommodified consumption and, on the other side, exposing business activity as the real product of the gallery, while creating a temporary meeting place for an enthusiastic audience that quickly embraced the project.

Tiravanija has continued to circumvent the aloof formality of ritualized and overdetermined art spaces and situations, by returning his audiences to the simple delight of a shared meal, or by importing other types of structures intended for nothing else but interaction. His works, which usually stipulate the element "lots of people," form a compendium of modes of sociability.

140. *Untitled, 1992 (street)*,
at 303 Gallery, New York,
Robert J. Shiffler Collection,
Greenville, Ohio



Untitled, 1994 (recreational lounge) included a tabletop football game and a refrigerator stocked with refreshments – a situation, like many real-life ones, where the object is actually the social

relations sought and realized in the space. *Untitled, 1995 (back of postcard reads:)* was a multi-functional “campsite” in a museum, featuring a large tent outfitted with cots and comfortable seats, a video station, and a Dan Flavin fluorescent-light sculpture, evoking camping-out as a formalized type of communality. For the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale, he organized a football game, acknowledging the combative history of the site and the sport, while candidly extending the possibility of play. He has built a stage for puppet plays and a rehearsal space for a rock band. He once played the soundtrack to *The King and I* on a record player and invited his audience to dance with him. For *Untitled, 1997 (playtime)* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he erected in the staid sculpture garden a child-sized education pavilion replicating Philip Johnson’s famed *Glass House* (1949), an extreme and striking icon of high modernist architecture.

Forsaking the conventional markers of artistic products (such as unity, preservability and, effectively, uselessness) in favour of utility, these projects embrace everyday life. They gain their significance through use: “For me, it’s the dirt, and it’s the fingerprints, and it’s the drip, and it’s

the thing falling apart that makes it much more valuable than it being kept and preserved – it has to have a life, or has to have a history for it to become something.”¹ Given this focus on usefulness and lived experience, it is fruitful to consider how Tiravanija's work relates to the modernist aims of the Bauhaus, with its concern for facilitating the constructive intersection of humans and their built environments – utopian ideals that would have been a reference point for architects like Johnson, and that continue to echo in today's product designs. Of course, such ideals have pitfalls, and Tiravanija's interventions, for their part, draw critical attention to the social, economic, and cultural implications of the contexts and situations he engages, without specifying a desired result. At the same time, by inserting convivial dwellings and circumstances for exchange into these contexts, he reveals a genuine concern with providing structures that will encourage open-ended social relations – which in his work seem by definition to be productive.

The corollary to Tiravanija's serving of others is his own self-effacement. Although this may seem surprising, since he is often physically present, his work is complete only with the audience's participation. He is able to focus on the act of sharing and on abstract social exchange precisely because he cedes control. His projects use himself as the catalyst to develop an open, generic space of potentiality: a balance between defining and enabling possibilities. Those works that refer to actual elements of his experience (his Thai heritage or his apartment re-created within a museum) utilize these as starting-points for new exchange. Tiravanija claims Andy Warhol as an influence, citing the latter's enabling of others: “In the end, Warhol was not that present in his work.... He created a place – the Factory – where other people could make things. With Warhol, what remains, somebody else made.”²

Yet Tiravanija's work is also a means of realizing his own identity. It is no wonder that he feels himself “decentred,” for he has lived an exceedingly peripatetic existence. Born in Argentina to a Thai diplomatic family, and moving as a youth between Thailand, Ethiopia, Malaysia, and Canada, he now travels almost constantly around the world with his work. Poised between restless nomadism and willingly adopted markers of identity, he suggests how his subjectivity is formed by homelessness, how travel brings him closer to home:

“Driving by or passing through I think actually takes me back to where I started.... Often I felt that I had actually no real attachment, no culture.... So, in a sense [I have] tried to make things which are a way to retrieve that situation.... I think I've realized that, if I keep moving, there is a certain kind of process which retrieves ... my own identity somehow without staying still.”³



142. Untitled, 1994 (from *Barajas to Paracuellos de Jarama, to Torrejón de Ardoz to Custada and to Reina Sofía*).
Voyage and installation for Museo
Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid



He goes on to discuss how his distance from Thai culture has shaped his identity: "The further you are the more you realize actually where you're coming from." So, although it represents a provisional or negative formation of identity, it is no contradiction that Tiravanija can be "often missing" from his work, yet see it as "a kind of cultural retrieval."

Spurred by exchange, Tiravanija's work is the nexus for realizing both his own identity and unspecified social processes. It seems to make an open offer – a generous invitation – yet the situations are not entirely comfortable: one might be reluctant to act the freeloader, or wonder if there is a catch, or simply not be ready to emerge from oneself to engage with strangers. And if Marcel Mauss's analysis of gift-giving applies, one should assume that Tiravanija's gifts are part of a "system of total services" that entails "the obligation to reciprocate."⁴ So what is expected in exchange? Perhaps it is an equally simple, though equally loaded, gesture: to accept to participate; for *conscious* participation inevitably entails a consideration of the larger conditions embedded in these activities and contexts. By accepting the not so free invitation, one agrees to be an active and attentive participant in the interaction that fuels cultural actualization. G.K.

Notes

1. Rirkrit Tiravanija in interview with Rochelle Steiner, *Parkett*, no. 44 (July 1995), p. 117.

2. Rirkrit Tiravanija cited in Carol Lufty and Lynn Gumpert, "A Lot to Digest," *Artnews* 96:5 (May 1997), p. 153.

3. Quotes in this paragraph from unpublished interview with Diana Nemiroff and Barbara Dylnerska, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, September 1997.

4. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Hall (London: Routledge, 1990).