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Bruce Hainley, "Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing? Rirkrit Tiravanija's Art of Living," *Artforum*, February, 1996

ARTFORUM



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1.

Consider "between," "use," and "duration"—and then consider their relation to "interruption."

I am amazed by the way food shapes the body.

Montgomery Clift is on television in *Wild River*, 1960, which means there is a haunted presence in the room, beauty cracked. Years before, during the filming of *Raintree County*, 1957, his looks and career were changed forever due to an auto accident, and Monty, spooked by the stiff wreck of his postcrash visage, in each subsequent role figures out what remains and what this means.

Vince told me he was rereading John Cage's *Silence*. I had never read it.

Interruption requires some notion of between; without it there would be nothing to interrupt. The work of Rirkrit Tiravanija exists between art and life, between here and there, between beginning and ending. More precisely, it interrupts what is simply marked "art" and "life," "here" and "there," etc. The process of its happening is as important as its conceptualization and documentation; placed between, it opens up to change, to chance, to life rather than the mausoleum—life and its flux, waiting, distractions, failures, everyday disruptions.

I am in love with a boy who smells of bergamot and makes me think of pudding.

What does Montgomery Clift have to do with Rirkrit Tiravanija? I am not sure. Perhaps nothing, or nothing other than being yoked by a moment—now—and a concern for distance, travel (Rirkrit's search around the globe to get where he's going and to do what he's doing—art or its replacement—and Monty's journey he took after his looks were shattered toward a skewed interiority).

Reading *Silence* was like being struck by lightning.

Tiravanija designs (or finds) his objects, particularly those in his food pieces, so that they must be used again. Since cooking nourishes many of his works, the *raison d'être* of his objects (the cured wok of *Pad Thai*, 1990, the four empty cases of Rolling Rock beer of *Untitled [Blind]*, 1991, or the kitchen utensils in numerous works) is that they be used again: not using them, literally, spoils them. He perverts Wildean declarations of uselessness by focusing on the useful, but only as it is in the process of being used up. "Basically I started to make things so that people would have to use them," he has said, "which means if you [collectors, museum curators, anyone in these roles] want to buy something then you have to use it. . . . It's not meant to be put out with other sculpture or like another relic and looked at, but you have to use it. I found that was the best solution to my contradiction in terms of making things and not making things. Or trying to make less things, but more useful things or more useful relationships. My feeling has always been that everyone makes a work—including the people who . . . re-use it. When I say re-use it, I just mean use it. You don't have to make it look exactly how it was. It's more a matter of spirit." To describe the duration of a Tiravanija piece, you would have to figure out a way to combine the temporality of forever, now, and never: since an important part of Tiravanija's esthetic is not to waste anything (leftovers are stored in Tupperware) they approximate forever, having been created for a specific "now," but they also work against never—that this occurrence will never not have happened. Situated to resist conclusions, the only point of Tiravanija's art is to begin and to be begun again.

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2.

Chocolate pudding! Yes, the creamy, soothing smoothness of chocolate pudding! Of course, its most special made from scratch; done properly, it makes mousse look fussy, like someone putting on airs, and pannacotta too delicate and testy. Homemade chocolate pudding is dense and warm, yum, and recently I have even found a quick batch of Jell-O pudding—heat milk and stir—a fun distraction, like the pleasure of popcorn or hard candy. At my laziest, the Swiss Miss ready-made pockets of caramel and chocolate —just peel back the tab: no mess, no stove needed, ready as you are and when you are—are a silliness to be fully savored. The cool, refrigerated pleasures of the entirely synthetic —how comforting it is to know they are there, in their pleasant eager tubs.

Tiravanija's work encourages digressions, asides, obliquities. Since his parameters are frequently only as narrow as life on Earth, what kind of critical response does his art necessitate? One that can make use of Montgomery Clift, last night's meal, chatter, boredom, wanderlust. What was done and what is being done govern a good deal of his enterprise, which I will call the art of living, although I'm not sure I could explain the difference between that phrase and "life." (The expression "life in general" hovers around me like a pleasant bee.) If art is visual meaning that cannot be verbalized—meaning that can be expressed only in paint, in detritus, in food, on video, and so on—then any commentary must run alongside it, juxtaposed. What might happen if art criticism, commentary, started from this assumption—juxtaposition—and moved far adrift or entirely renounced running alongside and burrowed within?

Silence closes with the essay "Music Lover's Field Companion," which begins: "I have come to the conclusion that much can be learned about music by devoting oneself to the mushroom. For this purpose I have recently moved to the country. Much of my time is spent poring over 'field companions' on fungi. These I obtain at half price in second-hand bookshops, which latter are in some rare cases next door to shops selling dog-eared sheets of music, such an occurrence being greeted by me as irrefutable evidence that I am on the right track." I don't need to tell you how deeply this resonates with the matters at hand. Everything is at hand.

3.

If a tourist is one who, wrapped in a blanket of distance brought along from wherever it is he came, only visits, then Tiravanija is a traveler, never arriving but already living *there*, an elsewhere that goes with him. His itinerary between different places, his driving or his being driven within a given city, places more importance on the journey than on any destination—these various trips are not the side effects of his esthetic project but what motors it, what causes it to arrive at what it is. One of his most recent pieces, exhibited at the Basel Kunsthalle, *Untitled (From Madrid Airport to Reina Sofia)*, 1994, was a video recording of a bicycle trip along back-roads, highways, and train lines from Madrid's airport to the Reina Sofia Museum. His bicycle was his video camera's constant dolly as well as the wheels transporting him and his movable feast—on his back a rucksack of his own design contained a portable gas stove, cooking utensils, and food. Tiravanija stopped and fed people he met along his way. While his work has definite connections to what are often seen as nonartistic events—camping, cycling, dining out, picnicking—one might think of Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, as a kind of blueprint (menu?) for a kind of work no one before Tiravanija had the wit or courage to complete—the studio as glen, the artist as nature boy, the "nude" as esthetic preconceptions stripped away.

Pad Thai changes from restaurant to restaurant. It is always impossible to predict what semblance to some never-approached pad Thai ideal will be served. Heat on the side or already applied? Lemon or lime? Crushed peanuts on top, peanut sauce stirred in, or a dish of it to be poured over by the diner? Will there be broccoli, cabbage, carrots, sprouts? Too much egg, too little? Would you describe it as New Age or old-fashioned; oily or streamlined; fresh or frozen? Good or bad it is still pad Thai.

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I do not think the desire to come up with a new kind of criticism to adore, contemplate, confront, and resist what is before one is unique. Yet while artists drive on in pursuit of things elusive and unformulated without them, art critics, a good deal of them, remain hitched to the thesis sentence (clarity, explication), like an Amish farmer to the horse-drawn buggy.

Tiravanija on his grandmother, his biggest influence: "I grew up in her kitchen. We watched a lot of TV together. She owned a big restaurant. I don't remember what it was called; I think it was my uncle's name. It was in the garden of my grandfather's house, and everybody in Bangkok came to eat there. It was one of the first garden restaurants in Bangkok. She also taught cooking on Thai TV."

4.

The drama of much of Tiravanija's work resides in its often unspoken use of the body and chance. By serving food, by relying on people moving around, through, and inside and outside his work, his performances play with the inside (alimentary canal, heart rate, mood) and outside (sweat from the heat of Thai spicing, sunshine on skin) of the body in ways few artists have (Joseph Beuys' alterations—by felt density—of a room's temperature and thus a body's heat within that room come to mind, as do Bob Flanagan's very different medical probings and displays). Explicit site of Tiravanija's investigations, his use of the body (his own, yours, mine) returns esthetics to gastronomic as well as cerebral consideration. How odd, how refreshing, that such an objectless project should revisit questions of taste.

5.

Cumin, coriander, chervil, sage, asafetida, caraway seeds, garlic, nutmeg, cinnamon, vanilla, sea salt, kosher salt, pepper, dill, Italian parsley, allspice, clove, baking powder, baking soda, cilantro, lavender, paprika, basil, rosemary, thyme, cocoa, ginger, brown sugar, sesame seeds, poppy seeds, turmeric, black mustard seeds, tamarind, garam masala, pumpkin seeds, honey.

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6.

Is there an art of eating? Is cooking an art? Is a good host, like a good director or choreographer, an artist? By juxtaposing, even confusing, cooking and art, does art become a necessity? Do you think art is a necessity, like nourishment?

Cage: "Surely things happening at different times are also related."

7.

Is a "play" the written text, the premiere performance, or some production many years later? Tiravanija sees the repetition, reproduction, and immediacy—the ritual—of drama within art, and his audience as participants, collaborators, or even artists. In many of his installations, a fairly common material is "lots of people"—in his *Untitled (Meet Tim & Burkhard)*, 1994, he lists as materials "furniture, refrigerator, TV-Set, videotape, music, drinks, lots of people." Relying on "lots of people" to animate his work allows interruption and the chance that something could go wrong—allergic reaction, food poisoning. What is going on may not be the same as what will go on. While most visual culture depends on "lots of people" but rarely acknowledges it, Tiravanija knows, as does a chef or hostess, that his work is impossible without them. He gets them to indulge in what is already theirs. He has commented on the importance of walking over a Carl Andre floor sculpture and yet the sad hesitancy to do so: "I think it's a big barrier for people to break to walk over a Carl Andre piece. And to be able to break that barrier lets you get somewhere further than just standing and looking at it from a distance." For his piece in the last Whitney Biennial, *Untitled (D)*, 1995, Tiravanija constructed a party shack and provided instruments for anyone to pick up and play while a black-and-white movie of Marcel Broodthaers in New York, like an early Warhol film, provided a silent visual backdrop. Few people picked the instruments up and played, silenced by timidity, fear of being thought stupid or wrong. Tiravanija states: "I don't think one should have fear. I'm not afraid. . . ." Touch it, eat it, handle it, put it in a box, unpack it, move it around, laugh at it, cry, finger it—it (his art) enjoys it.

What did you eat last night? What is your favorite food? What is your favorite restaurant? Do you know how to cook? Who is the best cook you know? Do you read articles on food, cookbooks, recipes, not ever really intending to make them, just for the sounds, just for the idea? Can you name three writers who write about food well? Could you get along with someone who had no taste? What if you cooked a meal and nobody ate it?

Tiravanija allows the chaotic by including "lots of people" in his art. Who knows what "lots of people" will cause? They may turn mob; they may fall asleep; they may pay attention to the wrong things entirely. In looking at art, what would it mean to pay attention to the wrong things entirely? Tiravanija has managed to base his esthetic on the richness of such a possibility, on the chance of such confusion.

Cage: "Theatre takes place all the time wherever one is and art simply facilitates persuading one this is the case. So that this ignorance I speak of is not losing sensitivic responsiveness, on the contrary. It is a question of when: now."

8.

What is his work "about"—not arrival at something embalmed but at the mix and mess of the "en route," the in flux, the elsewhere. His work, like a recipe, can be made to feed one or many. He will not tell you how to eat it. He will give you dinner companions but will not tell you what to talk about. He will play the host to your guest, knowing that the roles could be reversed. He will place this next to that (a book about him might be called *This and That All Over the World*). He will allow you to make everything or nothing of this this next to that that.

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Because of his Thai origins, many have linked Tiravanija's esthetic to Eastern philosophies. This may be perfectly apposite, perhaps even crucial. Yet consider, for a moment, that the importance of wandering, of chance, of duration, of openness defies simple national and temporal boundaries. When John Keats was asked, "Why endeavour after a long Poem?" he said he would answer: "Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading: which may be food for a Week's stroll in the Summer? Do not they like this better than what they can read through before Mrs. Williams conies down stairs? a Morning work at most. Besides a long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder. Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces? I mean in the shape of Tales—This same invention seems indeed of late Years to have been forgotten as a Poetical excellence." For "long Poem" read "art": focus on the wandering, forgetting, and food—the connections between them. Consider Tiravanija's work a long poem that will never be finished.

9.

It looks like a recipe, not like criticism. It looks like a meal, not like art. But what does criticism, what does art look like? Tiravanija suggests it is better to not know, to question knowing what art is. When Frank O'Hara wrote the first monograph on Jackson Pollock, he was responding to the "action" of Pollock's work, but not in ways that, in hindsight, might be expected. In love with the ballet (under Balanchine), lover of a dancer (Vincent Warren), O'Hara saw painting as he saw dance—and the "action" in Pollock as something in the process of going away. What if a painting is as ephemeral as dance? By looking at the plastic arts as if they were already en route to dance, to disappearance, O'Hara allowed the variety of now to enter into his writing of poetry and art criticism. He intensified his perspicacity and daring by conversations with John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Edwin Denby. A criticism that is open to doubt, mess, confusion, chance, disregarding any dichotomy of objectivity and autobiography, style and substance, banality and excitement—this is the critical treatment necessitated by Tiravanija's work. His pieces go from here to there, find the here already within there, feed who knows whom, documenting it all; reveal the balance or the thing beyond balance: everything and everything else.

Gertrude Stein: "Kisses can kiss us / A duck a hen and fishes, followed by wishes. / Happy little pair."

10.

Tiravanija instigates a revision and a reuse of one of his most crucial, although perhaps surprising, predecessors, Andy Warhol. The lineage is not immediately apparent: Warhol's work, especially his amazing '70s investigations of spectacle and shininess, is frequently dismissed as superficial, the work of the undead, while Tiravanija's work is celebrated for its "socioesthetic ritualism," a term shrouded in the bland moral goodness of the serious and spiritual. But through the lenses Tiravanija himself provides (for *Parkett's* series of artists' editions he contributed a pair of gold spectacles), look again at Warhol's gastronomical beginnings (the gay ice-cream fetes at Serendipity; his Campbell's soup cans); see Warhol's walking the streets of New York handing out free copies of *Interview* not as sales promotion but cruising toward more useful and useless relationships; Warhol's discoing at Studio 54 a nightly installation/happening, not unlike Tiravanija's opening parties with Rolling Rock and music-making; Warhol's ongoing relationship with his "wife" (a tape recorder) and Polaroid camera, a first cousin to

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Tiravanija's use of "snap-shop" and his yearning to have a video camera on at all times. Remember that Warhol considered his best opening (at the ICA in Philadelphia, 1965) the one where all his art was removed, and that Tiravanija often removes the "art" at his openings as well (as in the opening of his show, 1994, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, at which the gallery was emptied except for the revelers). By adoring the democratic promiscuity of the image, Warhol was providing a précis of the imageless, which Tiravanija uses to full advantage by creating something in which the importance of the image is practically nil, an art of "where" and "when" and only later of "what." After Duchamp's feigning renunciation of art for chess and Warhol's repeated and reputed thwarting of any distinction between art and not-art, Tiravanija sends art (wherever and whenever that may be) packing, transporting it elsewhere.

Last night I ate out with my sister. We were served an amuse-bouche of dried apricots, cranberries, sugared walnuts, hazelnuts, and almonds; a wild mushroom pate, a Coho smoked salmon spread, marinated carrots and celery; I enjoyed an amazing Dungeness crab soup and tasted my sister's butternut squash curry soup laced with crème fraîche; I had a pavé of grilled salmon with a mustard crust, which came on a bed of kale and bulgur and was topped with a spiced pear chutney; my sister had an unguentary wild mushroom and kale risotto; we savored a good California Zinfandel; between the first courses and entrées we had a salad of mesclun and oak leaf with a cranberry-vinaigrette dressing and sprinkled with toasted filberts; for dessert we were offered a split of Beaume de Venise, along with profiteroles filled with chestnut cream and a bittersweet chocolate sauce and a pumpkin and white chocolate cold soufflé.

Something coming together then going apart—more than wok, foodstuffs, camping equipment, found materials, video—Tiravanija's art is time, the different sexy or bland materialities that time takes on: what is going on at the same time, at different times, the missed thing almost within purview, forever out of reach.

Cage: "The thing to do is to keep the head alert but empty. Things come to pass, arising and disappearing. There can be no consideration of error. Things are always going wrong."

Things are always going on.

Bruce Hainley contributes frequently to Artforum.



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