

Jerry Saltz, "Resident Alien," *Village Voice*, July, 1999the Village
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Resident Alien

Rirkrit Tiravanija's art is like a fungus. As with mold, mildew, and mushrooms, it is parasitical, lacks the artistic equivalent of true chlorophyll, grows virtually anywhere, and is mysteriously beautiful.

Tiravanija has insinuated his installation pieces into museums and galleries for nearly a decade now. These strangely delicate organisms, at once sculptural, architectural, and ephemeral, form intricate, reciprocal relationships with their hosts. You could even call them art-as-infection. His latest piece, now on view at Gavin Brown, is an intruder that first displaces the life of the gallery, gradually appropriates its functions, then forms an exquisite symbiosis with it.

Basically, Tiravanija has built a life-size model, mostly in plywood, of his East Village apartment-studio, in Brown's big front gallery. It's open 24 hours a day. You can go there now, if you want. It's got a working kitchen with a gas stove, a full bath, a bedroom, a VCR, a bunch of tapes, a boom box, and some books. You can sleep there, eat there, shower, or whatever. I met someone who claimed to have had sex there, and another person who said he had group sex there. I have only had lunch there.

Tiravanija, who was born in Buenos Aires in 1961, the son of a diplomat, has lived in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Canada. He is often perceived as the happy Thai guy—the generous guy who gives his art away and turns galleries into clublike places where people get together. In the beginning, his work consisted of cooking up big batches of vegetable curry and serving it to whoever came along; these pieces were like communions. He did this twice at the old 303 Gallery on Spring Street, once at the Carnegie International in a structure that replicated the 303 back room, and numerous times at institutions around the world. (Tiravanija is one of the more ubiquitous artists on the world exhibition circuit; there are nearly 100 group or solo shows listed on his résumé.) He considered the detritus of these events—the empty cans, dirty paper plates, and glasses—as sculpture. It was bad sculpture, and this selling of garbage as art was not particularly original, but it was also the first hint of something less than pleasant in the Tiravanija stew.

Because the "happy Thai guy" is the easy way out. In fact, Tiravanija's work is more than a little aggressive. His acts of displacement, annexation, or invasion are hardly passive. I'm fascinated by Tiravanija's quietly hostile

Rirkrit Tiravanija
Gavin Brown's enterprise
436 West 15th Street
Through August 31

BY JERRY SALTZ

takeovers, by his usurpation of meaning and function, his insistence that life proceed on his terms.

Tiravanija's art is almost entirely displaced as life takes over. Yet unlike most done-to-death deconstructive art, Tiravanija's doesn't debunk or destroy. He's not in a predatory relationship with his host. He's saying, "We really need each other." More than any artist I can think of, Tiravanija closes the gap between artist and dealer (or curator).

has simply provided more space for people to be together.

Tiravanija sets two principles into motion at the same time: life and death. He activates a situation and he lets entropy run it down. That's why, even with all the activity, you can feel the place falling apart: it's like a refugee camp, a squat, or a hideout. In the end, all he's doing is presenting an intensified, encapsulated version of everyday life.

About a week after *Untitled* opened, Tiravanija left for Europe. For a while, a couple of art students lived there. They sat around, looked at TV, ate their meals. I loved watching and talking to them—flashing back to student crash pads, the mess, the time,

and Art Club 2000 to Robert Storr, Dave Hickey, and Charles Saatchi. (I made it as a "trench critic.")

Untitled may be finishing off one phase of Tiravanija's work, while at the Venice Biennale he appears to be opening another. Here, he's contributed a brilliant, subtle, all-but-invisible piece. Instead of filling in and virtually replacing his "host," he adds a light but discordant note to the din of a 100-piece orchestra. But what a note! It keeps resonating in the mind until it forms a one-man power chord.

This note consists of planting a sapling teak tree on a site in the center of the Giardini directly in front of the American pavilion and just around the



Thrilling and seedy: a kitchen corner in *Untitled*, 1999 (tomorrow can shut up and Go away)

His symbiosis is nearly total.

I like the installation at Gavin Brown in concept, but being there can be difficult. I experienced unwanted waves of shyness, affection, and irritation there. *Untitled*, 1999 (tomorrow can shut up and Go away), as it is called, is like a laboratory for human contact. The situation is unstable, permeable, and open: thrilling and seedy. The piece occupies the gallery like a swollen, pulsating pupa: there's always something going on in it—planned, or unplanned.

Untitled is like Warhol's Factory as sweatshop or cottage industry, and shares some of the Factory's strengths and weaknesses. It can feel clabby and exclusive, but also brings out the best, or at least the unexpected, in people; it sanctions everything. Also, with *Untitled*, Tiravanija merely amplifies the tendency of the Gavin Brown gallery to mutate into a hangout or a headquarters. First this gallery had its back room; next it added a bar. Tiravanija

the life. It was weird: I wanted to protect their privacy and move in with them at the same time. Then they were gone, and I missed them.

Next a poli-sci major from Stanford moved in. One night, he and I watched part of the Knicks' valiant fourth-game loss to San Antonio. Two nights later, there was a foosball championship on a rented table, which I passed on. I have gone to a postopening party, a lunch, a dinner, and for drinks there. Right now, there's an exhibition of Peter Doig's drawings, and some snazzy-looking wallpaper by the '70s German Pop-Op artist Thomas Bayle. Ashley Bickerton has been spending time there as well, drawing a couple of wicked caricatures on the walls.

At the moment, the young artist-chronologist Erik Parker is working on a wild diagram of the art world called *Interpretation of the Situation*. Filling an entire living room wall, it features the names of art-world players and shakers, from Laura Owens, the Chapmans,

corner from the three "great powers" of England, Germany, and France. Tiravanija christened this unassuming structure the First Royal Thai Pavilion.

Until now, Thailand, a poor country, had no exhibition facility of its own. After Korea built its pavilion in the '60s, Biennale authorities ruled no more pavilions would be built in the main section of the Giardini. In other words, Asia, South America, and Africa would be moved to a back lot. Tiravanija has changed that. But there's more.

Tiravanija is the official commissioner of this pavilion, and will be in perpetuity; he will curate all subsequent exhibitions for the site. It's a diabolical diplomatic act—all the more pointed because the teak tree is indigenous to Thailand, but there are far fewer there due to decades of overlogging. If the tree can survive in the Italian climate, it will grow to be huge. If not, Tiravanija has secured permission to replant his tree for every Biennale. It looks like Tiravanija is here to stay.