

Sven Luetticken, "Rirkrit Tiravanija," *Artforum*, February, 2005

## ARTFORUM

**RIRKRIT  
TIRAVANIJA**  
MUSEUM BOIJMANS VAN  
BEUNINGEN, ROTTERDAM

**SVEN LÜTTICKEN**

The format of the retrospective exhibition seldom varies, no matter how ill suited it is to a particular artist's work. Rirkrit Tiravanija's midcareer survey at the Boijmans—subtitled "A Retrospective (Tomorrow Is Another Fine Day)"—was exceptional in its drastic problematization of the genre's conventions: There were no works or even remnants of works, only crude, empty plywood simulacra of seven gallery spaces in which Tiravanija exhibited over the past fifteen years. Walking through this show of voids, one encountered various sound tracks, various voices: Loudspeakers in several rooms broadcast the voice of a "ghost" scripted by novelist Bruce Sterling—the disembodied musings of a deceased art lover and gourmand who overdosed on food (including Tiravanija's) and now haunts the galleries. On the audio guide, a female narrator provided commentary on each exhibition past, according to a script written by Tiravanija himself. There were also live performers, and in this way a third text (also written from the perspective of a ghost, by Philippe Parreno) could be encountered.

Tiravanija's script often mimicked the maddeningly patronizing tone of audio guides, an effect exacerbated by the speaker's soothing voice: "It could be said that this was a seminal work for Tiravanija"; "Process is very much the key word here"; and so on. While Tiravanija isn't ordinarily associated with the practices that have come to be reified under the rubric "institutional critique," his retrospective consistently foregrounded the institution and its mechanisms in a way that could be seen as an elegant attack on naive forays into and conceptions of relational aesthetics. Especially with his pad thai cooking sessions—*cam*-exhibitions (*Untitled [Pad Thai]*, 1990, his first solo show, in the project room at Paula Allen Gallery, was represented-in-absence here), Tiravanija was often all too complicit in a romanticization of the art world which sprang from the impulse to counter the familiar criticism of that world and its spaces for being in their very essence a negation of life. As Sterling's script put it: "Imagine living in an art



Opposite page and above: Views of "Rirkrit Tiravanija: A Retrospective (Tomorrow Is Another Fine Day)," Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2004.

gallery. No, don't try, that's unimaginable." Tiravanija's art seemed to offer an alternative to the deadening experience of "autonomous" objects in sterile white cubes—a living art of "conviviality and encounters," of "connections and meetings" (to quote Nicolas Bourriaud). By a kind of dialectical magic, the art world as negation of life was, in the work of Tiravanija and others, transformed into a model for a *better* life—providing truly social situations, which have become increasingly scarce in capitalist society. But while art can indeed provide models, this particular approach

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led ever so easily to self-satisfied, self-congratulatory art-world jubilations: Only we are truly humane; only in the art world, with its productive negation of the impoverished social life under capitalism, is a care-free sociability possible. The problem isn't that social situations in art are always *also* representations of such situations (however real they may be for those involved) but that these representations cannot be viable models if they pretend that art institutions are value-free playgrounds. Under those conditions, such representations are shams, mere simulations of models.

By the time of his 1996 installation at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*, Tiravanija was clearly aware of this danger. This exhibition (which made for one of the largest empty spaces at the Boijmans) consisted of a replica of the artist's New York apartment, which could be used by visitors (to eat, sleep, watch TV) twenty-four hours a day. Tiravanija's romantic introduction of "real" social situations into the gallery space was counterbalanced by the Kunstverein's large, showroomlike windows, which emphasized the transformation of sociability into a proto-reality TV spectacle; furthermore, Tiravanija adorned the installation with potted palms, clearly evoking Marcel Broodthaers's analysis of museums and exhibitions. In the end, however, the faux-romantic side of this installation was far more dominant than such token suggestions of critique. By contrast, in the Boijmans retrospective (whose subtitle harks back to that of the Cologne show) Tiravanija confronted the ideological and institutional trappings of the museum head-on. The use of audio guides and live guides drew attention to the role of the discursive machinery of museum retrospectives; the use of live guides further emphasized the way visitors are directed, choreographed, rendered passive. In a nice rebuttal of the supposition that performance as such is more progressive than static, commodified representations, Tiravanija's retrospective suggests that performative art should be seen less as a step forward into some promised land than as a defense-by-mimesis against a highly manipulative performativity that is

at work everywhere in museums, not to mention less highbrow sectors of the culture industry.

For more than a hundred years, the art world has struggled to salvage the aura of the unique artwork. If glamour, especially in the form of celebrities, was the culture industry's serial, industrialized, ersatz aura, art tried to cling to uniqueness—whether in the form of unique objects or of performances, unique events. Of course, glamour has long since infiltrated art, as the romantic genius morphed into the media personality; when the Boijmans presents Tiravanija as the "charismatic personality of relational aesthetics," it glamorizes him. But the art star still depends to a large degree on the production of unique commodities or unique events, and in this respect Tiravanija's retrospective is highly traditional. What, after all, could be more unique than an absence, than a past exhibition that cannot be repeated and exists only as rumor? This retrospective thus had a mythologizing and self-serving aspect; it may not have shown any commodities, but it advanced the commodification of Tiravanija and his activities. However, the way in which it foregrounded its mechanisms of aura production and glamorization can still be seen as exemplary. Perhaps now that Tiravanija has staged a model retrospective that presents the museum as a lifeless site haunted by ghosts, he can make another dialectical turn and reinvestigate the conditions under which this sphere of negation may present models for change after all. □

Sven Lütticken is an art historian and critic based in Amsterdam.