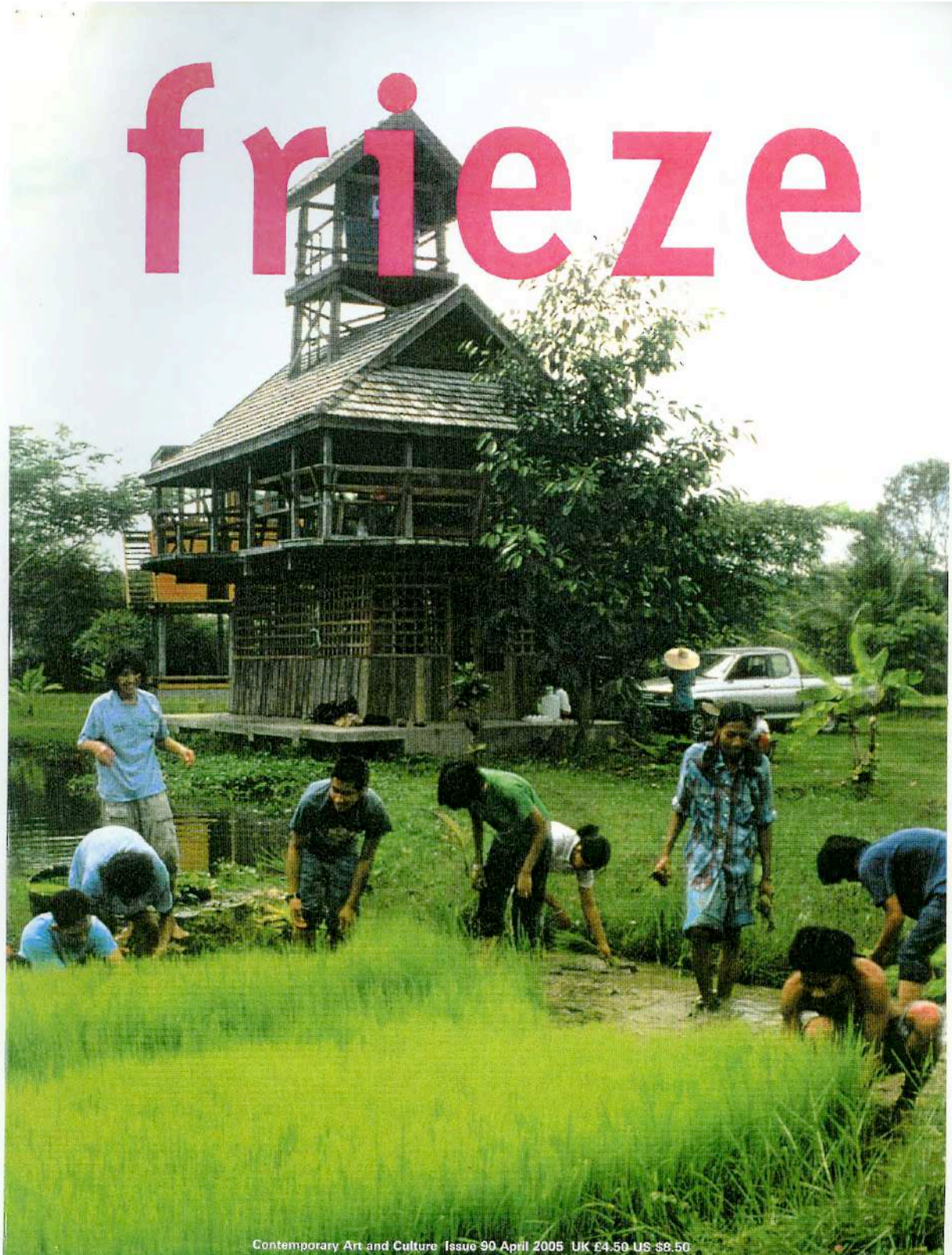


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Dan Fox, "Welcome to the Real World," *Frieze*, April 12, 2005

Frieze



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Welcome to the Real World

by Dan Fox

Rirkrit Tiravanija's mid-career retrospective demonstrates how his work has emphasized interpersonal activity over art production

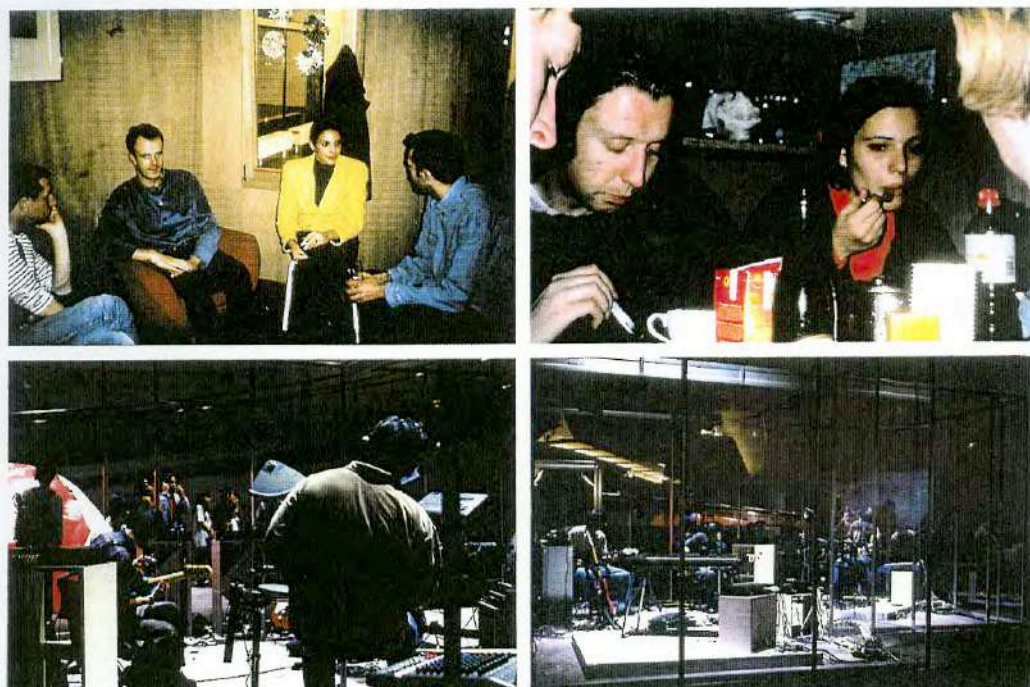
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In his sarcastic broadside against moral self-righteousness *Nice People* (1931), Bertrand Russell wrote that 'the chief characteristic of nice people is the laudable practice of improvement upon reality. God made the world, but nice people feel that they could have done the job better.' As far as artists go, I'm inclined to think that many of them fit this category. There is something about making art, about its tweaking, tugging, trimming re-imaginings of the world, that demonstrates, if not an itching dissatisfaction, then a certain sense of superiority towards it. Why, I sometimes wonder, can we not just leave it alone? After all, there's a world of possibility out there, and a great deal of it is often more interesting than what many artists do with it.

Much has been said of Rirkrit Tiravanija's 'improvements upon reality', most of it by other kinds of 'nice people', keen to frame the world with theory and observation. In their eyes his Pad Thai socials agglutinate into idealistic social fantasies. Open invitations to sleep over in a reconstruction of his apartment, snack on some noodles, jam with your friends in a rehearsal room, enjoy a beer and a favourite film with



Untitled 2002. Rirkrit Tiravanija. 2002 Mixed media installation view at Secession, Vienna. Photo: Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.



Top row: *Untitled 1996 (Tomorrow is Another Day)* 1996 Installation views at K&H Kunstverein, Cologne; Bottom row: *Untitled 1996 (Blind)* 1996 Installation views at Spiral Gallery, Tokyo
 Courtesy: Top: neugierigsmuseum, Berlin Bottom: Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

Tiravanija's work is so dependent on people, places and a certain moment in time, that it was never going to suit the average museum retrospective format.

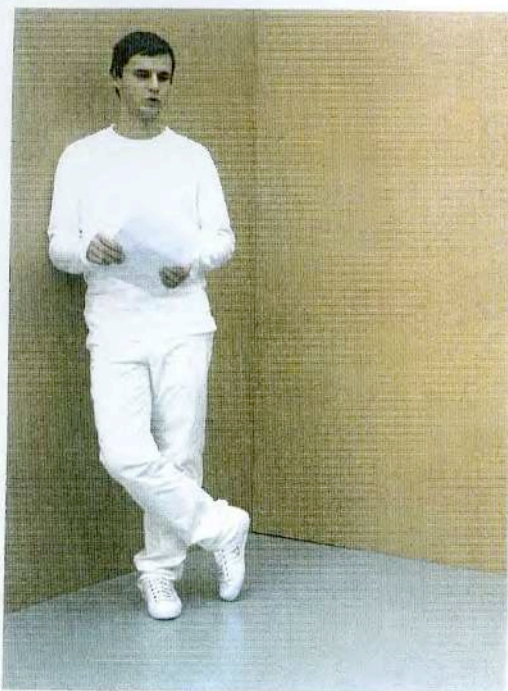
similar to being told about a great party you missed. Aggravatingly effervescent and gushing, the script is firmly in the register of curatorial interpretation hand-outs: 'his first one man exhibition, "Untitled (Blind)", put Tiravanija on the radar of the New York art world, where one exhibition can make or break an artist overnight', or "Tomorrow is Another Day" was for Tiravanija a work where all his essential ideas came together' and, more to the point, 'you may have wondered all this time why you are not in the presence of the work itself and are instead just given a story about or descriptions of the work or an event'.²

Thinking about the fictional astral plane on which 'Tomorrow is Another Fine Day' exists, prompts a train of thought about the spirit world of language it foregrounds in the absence of visual, tactile or hunger-slaking information. Language is wraith-like, translucent and shape-shifting. Words glide through physically impermeable pasts, spectral slaves at your service. What then, does setting these linguistic djinns to the task of retrospective reconstruction, to self-historicizing, mean for art criticism? The record of the work evanesces into rumour, which itself is reanimated as an elaborate game of Exquisite Corpse. I remember a head, you recall a torso, but it's the artist who gives these memories legs, since he assumes control of its canonical interpretation. Not only do the installations and works themselves become figures of the imagination; so too does any chance of empirical contact with the theoretical barnacles that grow around it. It neatly acknowledges the impossibility of ever being able to convey to someone else the singularity of the work – as Bruce Sterling's ghost laments: 'I wish I could explain to you what it's like to live.' Evaporation: from solid event, through verbal account, to invisible folk-tale.

Pause for a second. Most of the time it's just simpler to take advantage of language's multivalency and use it like an umbrella, covering as much semiotic space around you as you can. There's a point, however, at which the umbrella spreads too wide. Definitions grow fuzzy, meaning fogs. Words begin to lose their traction, and we're left with husks of definitions. Think about some of the art you may have seen over the last decade or so. Perhaps cast your mind back to recent conversations you may have had, books you've read, reviews idly skimmed or press releases sensibly screwed up and chucked across the room. Consider these buzzwords: 'meeting', 'exchange', 'dialogue', 'collaboration', 'discussion', 'relational', 'social', 'democratic', 'political', 'Utopian'. They have a familiar currency (albeit one that's heading towards the inflationary), but do I understand them in the same way you do? Can you tell me what this glossary of convivial togetherness means or, more precisely, what we're supposed to do with it?

Arguably more than with any other artist over the last 15 years Tiravanija's work has become the most emblematic of that which has sought to shift the emphasis and onus of art production onto interpersonal activity. Yet there's an implied 'usefulness' to all of this, one that is (typically for an art world that plays perpetual tug-of-war between academic precision and free-form thinking) unsettlingly vague. In an essay for *October* last year Claire Bishop pinpointed this disquiet accurately with regard to Nicolas Bourriaud's touchy-feely notion of 'relational aesthetics'. Noting that in these kinds of art works, 'all relations that permit "dialogue" are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good', she asks 'what does "democracy" really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical ques-

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"Tomorrow is Another Fine Day" 2004 Left and top right Installation views at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris 2005
Bottom right: Installation view at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam 2004
Courtesy: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Paris photograph: Marc Damage

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neighbours on your street or let your kids get their grubby hands all over a pristine Modernist pavilion, find limpet-like ideas attached to them, nourished by Benetton advert visions of the work's transformative potential. The demonstrative generosity of free food or 24/7 access to a museum gives wings to flights of libertarian day-dreaming, memories of teenage days reading Situationist panegyrics; 'everyone will live in his own personal cathedral!', 'the hacienda must be built!' Undoubtedly there's something New Age about Tiravanija's neo-hippie positivity, yet it's a little too easy to define his work in the rhapsodically Aquarian terms his activities usually inspire. The artist himself once commented that he tries to 'resist unnecessary staging of a reality that does not exist', and I suspect he's right. These aren't designs for life, but they're certainly a form of staging. (Is it not ostentatiously theatrical to encourage people to sleep over in a museum rather than a home or a hostel?) They stage the functional rituals of an average day, and in doing so demotically emphasize that the reality we all experience is one clumsily stuck at various stations between the blunt rock of tacit agreement called language and the hard actuality it refers to.

"Tomorrow is Another Fine Day" (on tour from Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, via the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris to London's Serpentine Gallery) is defined as Tiravanija's mid-career retrospective. Traditionally such exhibitions provide an opportunity for reflection, a rigorously circumspect degree of self-congratulation and then a bold step forward into new adventures. Yet Tiravanija's work, so dependent as it is on people, places and a certain moment in time, was never going to suit the average museum retrospective format. Rather than attempt to recreate past glories like a desperate rock band re-forming for one last tour, the artist created a homage to the half-truth. A revenant exhibition, 'Tomorrow is Another Fine Day' (an optimistic title for a rather melancholy show) reanimates the artist's most significant

works as a ghost ride. There's little to see but bare wooden rooms; schematic outlines of exhibition spaces with nothing but a title and date stencilled onto the walls. It's a show to be experienced as an event, somewhere between the more traditional dematerializations of Tino Sehgal's 'performed' works and the outrageous tall tales recounted by guards at Gianni Motti's Zurich retrospective last year. With robust self-awareness, and what could generously be read as a mischievous understanding of history and hagiography, Tiravanija's 15-year career can here only be experienced by word of mouth, a little trust and a modicum of scepticism.

Three routes are available. Moving cyclically from room to room, work to work, a disembodied voice reciting a short meditation by science-fiction writer Bruce Sterling describes with droll world-weariness how he died in an art gallery ('I succumbed to a massive heart attack ... due to a lifetime of overly rich Westernized foods') and has now been employed by Tiravanija to 'dwell on his past'. Like a particularly existential and miserable take on Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube* essays (1976), the voice points out that 'people are commonly born inside bare white rooms. You cannot live in there', and ends with a deadpan 'it's great to be alive'. Elsewhere, a rather more physical apparition – condemned eternally to repeat a script by Philippe Parreno – laments that 'it's hard to think about the present without thinking about the past because the past glows'. An altogether more abstract text, it shines a light not directly on Tiravanija's work but rather to one side, brightening corners, edges, nooks and crannies of recent history to provide some kind of broader social context. The third path is led by that much more familiar institutional presence, the museum tour guide. Taking as their starting-point a scripted account of the work by Tiravanija himself, the guide leads visitors from space to space, describing the work in detail while cheerfully and articulately fielding questions from visitors, all the while evoking a feeling not too dis-

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Top: *The Land Foundation* 1998–ongoing Collaborative project in Chiang Mai, Thailand; Bottom: *Untitled 1992 (Free)* 1992 installation view at 303 Gallery, New York
Courtesy: Top: The Land Foundation, Chiang Mai; Bottom: Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

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The friction Tiravanija's work creates is between uniqueness – of the unscripted and unpredictable comings and goings of people – and replication.

tion to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?³ Tiravanija's work subtly yet distinctly implies that its 'relational' utility is directed towards some kind of nebulous end. I often wonder just what it is we're meant to 'discuss' in these 'social' spaces. The means of production in a digital age, or how cold the weather is? How to escape the pernicious tentacles of hyper-capitalism or a nice pair of trainers in Top Shop? GM foods or the tasty curry you had the other night? What can I gain from a conversation at a Tiravanija installation that I can't get from meeting my friends in the pub? Is my band likely to be more uninhibited in a sweaty rehearsal room in someone's basement or in his *Untitled 1996* (*Rehearsal Studio No. 6*) (1996)?

Rather than follow the line that takes Tiravanija's work at utilitarian face value (making music and eating food are too easily interpreted as ciphers for wholesome sociability), it's perhaps more productive to apply to them the logic of the theatre and the stage. For *Untitled 1996* (*Tomorrow is Another Day*) (1996) at the Kölischer Kunstverein, he built a fully functional scale replica of his New York apartment, complete with 24-hour access. People came and went, cooked, slept, chatted, bathed and in one instance even got married. In a sense the installation encouraged a form of play-acting, a grown-up game of 'playing house'. It's interesting to note how often commentators pointed out that nothing had happened during the course of the show, as if the staginess of the piece somehow discouraged anti-social behaviour. *Untitled 2002* (*He Promised*) (2002) was a reconstruction at Secession, Vienna, of Modernist architect Rudolf Schindler's Los Angeles studio. Fabricated in chrome and mirrored steel, *Untitled 2002* (*He Promised*) was built across the ten-week duration of the show, alongside programmed discussions, film screenings, live events and, of course, food. The mirror surfaces of the structure reflected the building and visitors back at themselves, explicitly underlining the human activities rather than the formal architectural qualities of the piece. Again it was less about the seamless blurring of art into life than the staging of a large-scale *tableaux vivants* illustrating cosmopolitan cultural diversions.

The brief communal passages Tiravanija creates are *doppelgänger* leisure spaces. One bar, after all, is much like any other bar – we know what they're there for, we know how to use them. There is no *Ur-café*, no blueprint community centre or mother ship crèche from which all others are zygotically spawned. All social spaces are unique, and all social spaces are much the same. The friction Tiravanija's work creates is between uniqueness – of the unscripted and unpredictable comings and goings of people – and replication: a rebuilt canteen, apartment, day-care centre or Modernist dream house. (The degree to which the people factor ties into the ever burgeoning art world bias towards 'event culture' and art tourism is another whole kettle of fish.) Moving leisure environments from their usual context into that of an art framework shifts their legibility and makes their function vague. It's like the first time you see a Carl Andre floor piece and wonder if it really is OK to walk across it; you feel wrong-footed, uneasy with your own expectations about the legitimate boundaries of this ever so slightly repurposed activity.

One of the curious aspects of the artist's practice is the cheery register in which it sits. Yet 'Tomorrow is Another Fine Day' is shot through with a certain sadness for good times now long gone. *Untitled 1992* (*Free*) (1992), in which the contents of 303 Gallery in New York were taken from behind closed doors and cupboards and stacked up in the gallery, was a more aggressive gesture than people

give credit. It emphasized the holdings of a gallery as just 'stuff' in a slightly absurd chain of economic exchange; clutter, bits of wood, fabric, plastic. Bishop, in questioning both the eulogistic language used to describe the artist's work and Bourriaud's own happy-clappy idea of democracy, quotes Rosalyn Deutsche, who contends that 'conflict, division, and instability do not ruin the democratic public sphere, they are conditions of its existence'.⁴ Tiravanija himself has identified the importance of 'difference' in relation to 'Utopias', an often misused word that crops up frequently: 'In order for it to work there have to be differences, knowing that everything can happen and move along at the same time'.⁵ *Community Cinema for a Quiet Intersection* (after Oldenberg) (1999) polled the residents of a Glaswegian suburb to find out their four favourite films. These movies, *A Bug's Life*, *Casablanca*, *The Jungle Book* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, were then screened simultaneously at a local cross-roads one evening, accompanied by a Thai barbecue. *Community Cinema ...* provided an excess of consumer choice, variety and friction, a multiplex of difference unregulated by the politeness of screening the films one after the other.

Initiated in 1998, The Land Foundation is a vital correlative to Tiravanija's museum- and gallery-based activity. Twenty minutes from Chiang Mai, a rural area that was rendered largely unusable for rice cultivation owing to flooding was acquired by a group of Thai artists, including Tiravanija, and cultivated as an open space for social use. Using only sustainable resources, the foundation is intended to be self-sufficient, and a number of artists have been invited to help achieve this. With no gas or electricity supplies in the area, Superflex, for instance, have been working on a system of harnessing bio-mass (the gas produced by shit) as a form of power. A young Thai artist, Prachya Phintong, is working on a system of ponds for cultivating fish, using water purified of pesticides from nearby farms. Others, including Atelier van Lieshout, Mit Jai In, Parreno, Tobias Rehberger and Kamin Lerdchapraser, have contributed architectural ideas for kitchens, communal meeting rooms, meditation areas and accommodation.

The Land Foundation is not a collaborative work of art. It is a model for community development and sustainability that attempts to help side-step the more tempting offers of economic investment and regeneration that are offered to countries that rely on the influx of money from tourism. It exists at one pole of Tiravanija's activities; a pragmatic analogue to more rarefied, intellectually delicate gallery work, one that understands human relations not in terms of some fanciful essentialist psychology of happy co-existence but in practical, structural terms. At the opposite pole, like Charles Baudelaire's painter of modern life, Tiravanija points to 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent', but tries not to pin them down, or dull their intensity with the stasis of fixed representation. That, after all, is for 'nice people' to do. For the rest of us there's the far more important business of living to be getting on with.

Dan Fox is associate editor of *frieze*.

1 Bertrand Russell, 'Nice People', 1931, reprinted in *Why I am Not a Christian*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 87

2 Rirkrit Tiravanija, 'No Ghosts in the Wall', in Bruce Sterling, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, *A Retrospective (Tomorrow is Another Fine Day)*, exh. cat., Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2004 pp. 53–92

3 Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110, Fall 2004, p. 65

4 Ibid.

5 Matthias Herrmann in conversation with the artist, Secession exh. cat., Vienna, 2002, p. 29