

Gregory Galligan, "Follow the Screenplay," *Art Asia Pacific*, June, 2009



artasiapacific



RIRKRIT TIRAVANAJA, *Untitled (demonstration no. 145)*, 2007, graphite on paper, 9.3 x 11.5 in. Collection of Craig Robins, Miami. Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

PERSPECTIVE

Follow the Screenplay

Rirkrit Tiravanija and the "relational aesthetics" artists arranged casual social interactions as art—were they adhering to a script? By Gregory Galligan

Complex artistic concepts are often realized most successfully by the simplest material structures. Douglas Gordon and Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Cinéma Liberté/Bar Lounge* (1996/2008), their collaborative contribution to the recent exhibition of ten mid-career artists, "theanyspacewhatever," at New York's Guggenheim Museum, provides one such example. A sparsely furnished video-projection salon composed of painted plywood and cushioned "throw" seating, the piece boldly occupied a section of Frank Lloyd Wright's spiraling rotunda. Steps away, two well-dressed baristas poured museum visitors espresso, compliments of the premium Italian coffee company Illy. During any given day of the exhibition's run in late 2008, one could plunk down before a screening of one of 12 American films playing in a continuous loop, including Tod Browning's 1932 cult horror classic, *Freaks*. On *Freaks*' initial release during the Great Depression, the Hollywood caper swiftly gained notoriety for its grotesque portrayal of human midgets, sexual attraction, psychological mayhem and—as if to mock all sense of reality—corporeal mutilation. As the Guggenheim's wall text informed observers, *Freaks* was ultimately "banned in the US," as were the other 11. By screening these dozen films, Gordon and Rirkrit suggested the potential for social and cultural self-reckoning by a concerted exercise in visual perception.

Gordon and Rirkrit first exhibited this three-

dimensional tableau at the 1996 biennial Manifesta 1 in Rotterdam, and that same year in Glasgow, each time featuring a unique roster of films selected to reflect on a local social or aesthetic premise. Their reinsertion of these 12 cinematic artifacts within "theanyspacewhatever," a sleek exhibition conceived under the current art-theoretical rubric of "relational aesthetics," promised nothing less than a thoughtful experience of existential reflection, given the films' unblinking treatment of the modernist themes of consumerism, voyeurism and cultural chauvinism. It remains unclear, however, how many visitors ever grasped the production's conceit, or the significance of the obtuse contributions—many were visually incomprehensible without the explanatory wall text, exhibition brochure or catalog entry—made by each of the remaining eight artists selected for this venue. Generally working with dissimilar methods and materials in their sculptures and installations, these artists—Angela Bulloch, Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Jorge Pardo and Philippe Parreno—had been drawn together like venerable alumni from an even larger ensemble originally gathered together by the French curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud in his seminal 1996 exhibition "Traffic" at the CAPC Bordeaux.

In that exhibition, Bourriaud set out to articulate a global 1990s trend in what previously had been loosely referred to as installation art, a term reflecting a new generation's indebtedness to the creative legacy of 1960s Happenings and the neo-Dadaist spirit of Fluxus. Further elaborating on the subject in his subsequent 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics* (Les presses du réel, Paris), Bourriaud enumerated the characteristic features of a new era, during which social and interactive events constituted new forms of creative activities, in lieu of an earlier modernist privileging of "aesthetic objects" for purely optical contemplation. Bourriaud envisioned the advent of the artist as a producer of "useful," if "minor modifications" of a

GLADSTONE GALLERY



DOUGLAS GORDON & RIRKRIT TIRAVANJIA
Cinéma Liberté/Bar Lounge, 1996/2008, installation view at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008. Photo by David Heald. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

given social context so as to introduce, or otherwise induce, new models of “democratic” living, behavior and ethical intercourse among a “convivial” circle—the latter referring to temporary, chance encounters occasioned by the communal viewing of any given art work. The creative act was in itself being re-conceived as one primarily directed at eliciting—over what was often an extended period—the audience’s own participation in the artwork’s production, thereby disrupting the common boundaries separating the events of daily life from those in museums or other such rarefied institutions. Bourriaud’s co-founding in 2002 with curator Jérôme Sans of the Palais de Tokyo, an experimental space in Paris, expressly embodies such principles.

In his most recent exhibition, the Tate Triennial 2009: “Altermodern,” which showed at London’s Tate Britain through late April, Bourriaud has apparently come to terms with the fact that if any artistic genre or model may be said to underlie the work of his loose constellation of “relational” artists—as well as the event-filled and often disjunctive type of exhibition they have come to typify—it is cinematography. In his catalog essay to “Altermodern”—a term that has itself come to entirely supplant his 1990s “relational aesthetics” discourse—Bourriaud reflects on the nature of a new kind of museum exhibition structured around a “space-time continuum” occurring between, “the curator’s voice-off, the statements of the artists, and the dialogues woven between the artifacts,” adding: “This hybrid arrangement is best compared with the production of a film, and cinematographic metaphors provide the clearest introduction to an event like *Altermodern*.”

Carrying Bourriaud’s revelation to its logical conclusion, it is the screenplay itself as a creative genre which, as one do-it-yourself guide suggests, furthers “a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure,” that perfectly characterizes the perpetual fluctuation in “relational” artworks between conditions of solidity and fragmentation, stillness and movement, optical impression and conceptual resonance.

Bourriaud’s cinematic analogy is readily apparent in the work and career of Rirkrit Tiravanija, whom Bourriaud championed in the early 1990s as embracing the emerging “relational” outlook. In the late 1980s, Rirkrit made his debut as a decidedly new kind of interactive shaman, cooking Thai curry in a New York art gallery and hosting random passersby like an amiable café proprietor, as if every chance encounter was an indispensable part of his recipe. Subsequent solo shows in the United States and in Europe

throughout the early 1990s featured cooking or setting up other loosely structured social scenarios that were variously offered as premises for visitors’ direct participation in the artwork’s creation—virtually by default of visitors having wandered into its material orbit. The “relational” artwork often comprised a loosely choreographed “leftover” of a prior social event analogous to the chance “installation” one might find on awakening in one’s own living room after a lively dinner party. To cite but one example, Rirkrit’s *Untitled 1996 (tomorrow is another day)*, featured a full-scale mockup of the artist’s New York apartment, in which visitors were welcome to dine and lounge about at leisure.

A 2005 Rirkrit museum retrospective at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris took this concept of interpersonal encounter to an extreme by presenting the public with a kind of anti-cinema. Gallery attendants were instructed by means of what can only be reasonably called a screenplay (as published in the accompanying catalog) to usher unsuspecting observers through virtually empty rooms while orally reciting the material and intellectual parameters of Rirkrit’s former projects, thus conjuring their collective display in the imagination. The “retrospective” was thus realized as a phantasmagorical projection onto the viewer’s consciousness, where it took shape as pure concept, one wholly internalized and inducing a new mode of aesthetic reverie. In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud obliquely provides a rationale for such an aesthetic when he states that an exhibition by Rirkrit, “does not dodge materialization, but deconstructs the methods of making the art object into a series of events, giving it a proper time frame, which is not necessarily the conventional time frame of the picture being looked at.”

The potential for self-parody in regarding museums as sites for the scripting of communal interaction, or “momentary groupings” as Bourriaud dubs them, is perhaps best illustrated by Rirkrit’s return to Thailand in 2004 to install a retrospective at Chiang Mai University Art Museum. In the early stages of preparing for this exhibition, Rirkrit realized that the only way he might convey his aesthetic and conceptual *modus vivendi* to a local and mostly uncomprehending audience was to replicate his earlier oeuvre in didactic fashion. The conceptual distance between this kind of reflexive pedagogy and Rirkrit’s unique conceptual performance in his Paris retrospective one year later implies a willingness to syndicate for ready consumption otherwise ostensibly spontaneous methods.

It was all the more impressive, therefore, that in a solo show at New York’s Drawing Center at the end of 2008, Rirkrit offered a comparatively savvy public a more compelling, if modest, “relational” installation. The series “Demonstration Drawings” (2006–08) consisted of more than 200 pencil drawings depicting political protests from around the world, based on photographs from the *International Herald Tribune*. The drawings were commissioned by Rirkrit from itinerant Thai street artists. Rirkrit’s installation of the framed drawings suggested a cacophony of multiple viewpoints, giving rise to a powerful collective energy. Here, Rirkrit played the role of a cinematic director in the truly “relational” sense of the term. Having effectively catalyzed an artistic economy on the streets of Bangkok, he fully “instrumentalized,” or made useful, his means of production. The result was the creation of an exceptional space for Rirkrit’s aesthetic of the potentially disruptive cinematic projection.