

Blake Gopnik, "Cooking Up a Whole New Form of Art," *Newsweek*, March 14, 2011

# Newsweek

## omnivore ART



### Cooking Up a Whole New Form of Art

WHAT IF REMBRANDT MADE SOUP? RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA CHALLENGES AUDIENCES BY SERVING THEM DINNER.

By Blake Gopnik

**MICHELANGELO WORKED** in fresco and marble. Rembrandt preferred oils and etchings. Rirkrit Tiravanija—who just might be in their league—has his own trademark art supplies: curry paste and lime and, more important, the audience that eats his food.

His latest show just opened in New York, and one of its major works is a \$1 bowl of soup served by the artist to anyone who wanders in. His art isn't in the soup itself but in the social interactions it triggers. It's about "ourselves in each other's company, eating," says the exhibition statement. It expands "our ideas of sculpture to include even our digestive tract."

No, it's not April 1 yet. Rirkrit really is a celebrated figure, winner of all the big prizes in this country and major shows from Paris to Bangkok. (Rirkrit—who is

49 and goes by his first name—is from Thailand and lives there as well as in New York and Berlin.) "I think he's made us rethink everything about art and about experiencing art," says Rochelle Steiner, dean of the art school at the University of Southern California.

Ten days before the opening, Rirkrit is in the gallery, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, contemplating his plans for it. He says his work is about "resisting expectation and being open to the everyday—which is about the unexpected." He's turning the building's private kitchen into a public soup station. And he's designed a plywood structure, set inside the gallery's soaring spaces, that will be a facsimile of the smaller quarters where dealer Gavin Brown began. Workers are also starting to remove the gallery's windows and doors, so the elements, and passersby, can come inside 24/7.

Rirkrit says an art teacher once gave him an order that shaped his career: "Stop making art," he said. It took me a long time to understand what he meant, but it was very important." The idea was that only something that started out not seeming like art was likely to be the real thing. So Rirkrit went on to take the least artlike aspects

**The artist composes his "picture":** Oil and canvas are replaced by spices, bouillon—and us.

of life and declare them museum-worthy. He's installed plywood facsimiles of his New York apartment at the Serpentine in London and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, and invited visitors to do whatever they wanted there, from talking art to having sex to eating.

One thing Rirkrit's art is absolutely not about is gastronomy. "I used to say that I was not a very good cook. It was the people getting together that made it better food. Now I'm a better cook, but I still think that," he says. The artist's role as kitchen hand is central to the work, explains the French thinker Nicolas Bourriaud, who coined the term "relational aesthetics"

to describe such art. He says that just as pop art was all about the mass production of its time—think of Warhol's Factory—so from the start Rirkrit's work was echoing the new service economy. "It was absolutely clear that human relations were the new commodities to be sold," Bourriaud says.

Rirkrit, that is, may have arrived at the Facebook business model before Mark Zuckerberg. **NW**



**RIRKRIT'S SHOW**  
Runs through  
April 16

RUTHIE ABEL