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ARTNEWS

Curry Up!

BY *Emma Allen* POSTED 03/13/12

Following Rirkrit Tiravanija's recipe for success



Installation view of Rirkrit Tiravanija's *untitled (free/still)*, 2011–12, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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I began to smell something savory around Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 1991 *Untitled (Placebo)*. So I followed my nose—through the contemporary galleries of New York's Museum of Modern Art, into a room housing a wooden architectural frame erected around mounds of cardboard boxes, a beat-up fridge, low tables and stools, and a serving station complete with steaming pots and a ladle-wielding MoMA employee. I had arrived at Rirkrit Tiravanija's *untitled (free/still)*. And at 12:36 p.m., I was eating piping-hot Thai green curry (vegetarian, medium spicy), served on a scoop of rice.

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Tiravanija—who was born in 1961 to Thai parents in Buenos Aires, attended high school in Bangkok, and now spreads his time between New York, Berlin, and Chiang Mai, Thailand—originally staged this pungent artwork in 1992, when he moved all contents from the back office of New York’s 303 Gallery into the exhibition space. In the back room, the artist cobbled together a rudimentary kitchen where visitors could help themselves to a free meal and mingle. MoMA acquired the work last year, and the wooden structure framing the installation at the museum is a to-scale replica of 303’s office.

Earlier this year, hungry museumgoers could queue up to sample *untitled (free/still)* at MoMA, where the curry was dished out for three hours per day. Unlike the 1992 configuration, the food was prepared outside the room, in the museum’s cafeteria kitchen, and ferried up to the exhibition space. (Fire regulations prohibit cooking in the galleries.) On the afternoon of my visit, I was the 101st person to feast on Tiravanija’s art in the 36 minutes since they had begun serving, at noon.

“The work has to do with igniting some sort of commonality,” says Laura Hoptman, curator of painting and sculpture at the museum. “It’s about eating and about talking to people.”

“In every one of Rirkrit’s situations, Rirkrit himself is not indispensable. He can show up or he doesn’t show up, and he builds his work that way,” Hoptman adds. “There’s something very deeply Buddhist about this. And it has to do with relinquishing a kind of control and allowing chance operations to kick in.”

What I encountered at MoMA is a storied example of the artistic mode known as relational esthetics, in which a work of art is meant to spur social interaction. But this wasn’t exactly a space where communal activity could easily merge with the more rarefied aspects of art. It was a museum. So conventional art viewing had the upper hand.

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More specifically, it was a room filled with European tourists and other museum-going types, who spoke in hushed tones and photographed one another with smartphones as they downed their curry. People in the adjacent gallery gaped at diners through an opening in one wall, and diners gaped at nearby photos from Ai Weiwei's "Study of Perspective" series (1995–2003), which depicts the artist giving the middle finger to various global monuments. All in all, it was like a sacred soup kitchen for the middle-to-upper classes. But boy was the soup good.

Which was why, after swinging by Gonzalez- Torres's hard candy-filled installation for a palette-cleansing pineapple-flavored treat, I wanted more. So I fled to my apartment to pore over Tiravanija's 2010 cookbook, *Just Smile and Don't Talk*, edited by Thomas Kellein and originally compiled for an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bielefeld in Germany. I would prepare the green-curry recipe (with the added bonus of chicken) found in its pages—just as soon as I could hunt down coconut cream, holy basil, palm sugar, Thai eggplant, and kaffir-lime leaves. (An Internet search steered me to the wonderful Bangkok Center Grocery in Chinatown.)

I soaked slices of round green eggplant in salt water, added curry paste to fried coconut cream and simmered "until fragrant (do not burn)," and seasoned it all with fish sauce and palm sugar. Still, I had no idea how many servings the recipe would yield. Given Tiravanija's oeuvre, it could be anywhere from one to one hundred. On a whim, I doubled the recipe and ended up with about 25 small portions. I had finished preparing a very spicy dish and was ready to "eat and socialize," as the cookbook instructed.

There is, in fact, a precedent of collectors remaking Tiravanija's food pieces for select groups. Ohio collector Robert J. Shiffler, after purchasing *untitled 1992 (free)*, would whip up batches of curry for people who came to view his collection. So, feeling like a partial owner of the piece after cooking it myself, I placed two signs on the dining-room table. "Ask Emma about her Rirkrit Tiravanija curry,"

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read one. “This curry is actually a work of relational art. Please write your thoughts on the following pages,” read the other.

I started handing out dollops of curry and rice on paper plates, and soon guests were offering feedback. “It was a bit salty but I have to admit I ate the last bit of rice off the plate with my hands,” one visitor wrote in the comments pages. “At their most basic level, both art and food are cultural, social experiences that bring us closer together,” noted a thoughtful friend, adding, “Also this curry was really, really, really good.”

One of the youngest guests, however, perhaps best summed up the unsettling sensation of experiencing relational aesthetics when removed from the original, socially loaded context. “I cannot feel my tongue,” he wrote, before going back for seconds.

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