

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Raimar Stange, "Interview Rirkrit Tiravanija," *Spike*, April, 2012

## SPIKE

### INTERVIEW RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA



The land foundation, Chiang Mai, Thailand, Courtesy neugerriemschneider, Berlin, Photo: Liz Linden

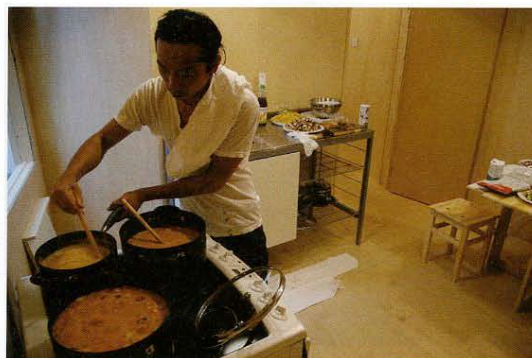
*He has become famous as a »cooking artist« – a misunderstanding that has almost concealed the real questions raised by his work for the past twenty years. Via email, Raimar Stange spoke with Rirkrit Tiravanija about this subject and the always surprising way that the artist has read Western culture against the cultural attitudes of his homeland, Thailand.*

"Far Eastern thought is not concerned with substance, but with relationships," remarks Byung-Chul Han in his book *Hyperkulturalität* (2005). Free from any prescribed dichotomy of subject and object, Rirkrit Tiravanija explores this relational connection in his work by using a variety of formulations. The different media used by the artist, which are often negotiated in cooperation with exhibition visitors or colleagues, range from installation and sculpture to performance and graphics, posters and sound installations to videos and books. So, it is no surprise that Tiravanija played a major role in Nicolas Bourriaud's theatre of »relational aesthetics«. Though at first sight convincing, this positioning is questionable; for, as critic Helmut Draxler rightly noted, Bourriaud's cult book of the nineties focuses

# I am not interested in leaving things behind, but ideas

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Exhibition views / Ausstellungsansichten »A Retrospective (tomorrow is another fine day)«  
Serpentine Gallery, London 2005  
Courtesy neugerriemschneider, Berlin



Exhibition view / Ausstellungsansicht  
»Just Smile and Don't Talk«,  
Kunsthalle Bielefeld, 2010  
Courtesy neugerriemschneider, Berlin  
Photo: Philipp Ottendorfer

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specifically on »good relations, which art can allegedly use to oppose capitalism's logic of alienation«. This concentration on harmonious relations swiftly shifted some art from the nineties into the proximity of a compliant event culture.

Among other things, I asked Tiravanija about the possibilities and boundaries of this kind of affirmative relational work within a politically precarious context.

**RAIMAR STANGE:** When did you get the idea for your »cooking-situations?«

**RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJIA:** One day I was walking along West Broadway on my way to visit a gallery where I was supposed to participate in a group exhibition (curated by Robert Longo). I was thinking about the situation – that this would be the first time my work would be exhibited in New York. It seemed like a lot of pressure to succeed, so I decided to take the opposite attitude, which was to relax. Then and there, I decided to make something that was very close to me and that was part of my everyday experience. When I made the first cooking piece, it was not about cooking at all (I suppose it has never been about cooking!), but was rather a (kind of) museological critique – about cultural fragmentation (the removal or displacement of cultural artefacts from one (original) context to another, i.e. from the East to the West (from my perspective)). It was about reanimating certain structures in order to address the shifting of context, to bring back the everyday to objects which had been catalogued into a certain sphere of cultural value, such as the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum or – more closely related to my background – the Buddha statues and ceramic pottery in all sorts of museum in the West.

**STANGE:** Sometimes you cook, and other people eat; sometimes you let people cook, for example in your exhibition in Ludwigsburg in 1997. Why do you switch roles? Do you want to reflect aspects of production as well as of consumption in your cooking-performances?

**TIRAVANIJIA:** I was trying to reanimate objects (from readymades to pre-readymades) by reintroducing their function. A pot is a pot, a stove is a stove, and a chair is a chair. Initially, I didn't completely understand the Western dichotomy of »subject-object«. In Thai culture we don't have the same perspective; we have neither subject nor object – in a funny, Buddhist (philosophical, semiotic) way. When I started to cook and serve food (without planning to, purely by coincidence), I quickly realised that viewers (readers, critics) were interpreting the work as performance in a Beuysian sense, as a staged situation, which meant that viewers had a certain distance to it. I felt that this distance represented the gap in Western thought between »subject« and »object,« which I needed to attack and dismantle – the »doubt« about the author, or the »doubt« about the subject's position or positioning. So, in order to confuse the positions, I implicated the viewer. I suppose that raised questions regarding production and consumption. In talking about the works, I often bring up the idea that people sometimes walk on a floor sculpture by Carl Andre, only to find out midway (or all the way) through that they have been walking on a sculpture. Suddenly people are afraid that they did something they were not supposed to do (allowed to do). The curtain drops; it is a moment in which one produces and consumes at the same time.

**STANGE:** At Skulptur Projekte Münster in 1997, you surprised everyone by exhibiting a piece of puppet theatre. How did that come about?

**TIRAVANIJIA:** I like that – »surprised!« I would like to go from one surprise to another, or rather I would like to not satisfy too many expectations. Sometimes I meet expectations, though upon closer examination there should be some surprises. I was thinking about the people living in Münster and how they might have a love-hate relationship with the exhibition, with the fact that every ten years their park (nature) gets turned into a culture park (sculpture). I started to do some research – looking into the place's dark past – and found out that the zoo in Münster was a site of some contention; the man who founded the zoo was a priest who was interested in biology, which conflicted with



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*untitled 2011 (t-shirt, no t-shirt), 2011*  
 Silkscreen t-shirt factory / T-Shirt-Siebdruck-Produktionsstätte  
 859 x 391 x 333 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise



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*untitled 2011 (558 broome st, the future is chrome), 2011*  
 Plywood, tempered glass, aluminum window frames,  
 glazed ceramic with palladium luster / Sperrholz, Hartglas,  
 Aluminium-Fensterrahmen, glasierte Keramik mit Palladiumglanz  
 859 x 391 x 333 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise



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Christianity's creation myth, and he was therefore excommunicated. But this Christian town has a society that works to raise money for the zoo. The society puts on theatre performances (a drunken theatre) where men dress up, play female roles (and vice versa) and get drunk on stage – in other words it is debauched and out of control. One play performed at the theatre told the story of a family of farmers, in which the old parents wanted their son (their only son) to take over the family farm, but the son refused because he wanted to be an artist. He left the farm for Münster. The farm was then passed on to his sister and her husband, but in time the farm ran into trouble and fell into debt. At a desperate moment before the family was going to lose the farm, word arrived to their son in town. By then, he had become an established artist. He returned home to save the family farm using the fortune that he had made as a successful artist. Yes, the artist saves the day! I'm sure it was a surprise in those days!

I also wanted my work to involve the local people in order to close the gap between the community and the outsiders. I wanted to work with a school that was located near the original site of the zoo. (It has long since been relocated.) I came up with the idea of puppet theatre because I was looking for a form that was sculptural as well as one with a built-in handicap for the players. The thought was that this might create chaos and emulate drunkenness!

**STANGE:** In your exhibition Social Capital at Migros Museum in Zurich in 1998, you installed a supermarket. Also included in the show was an auto repair shop produced in collaboration with Franz Ackermann as well as works by other artists, for example Douglas Gordon and Dan Flavin. How important is collaboration in your work?

**TIRAVANIJA:** It is important to the same extent that an audience should be involved in the work. I am not interested in authorship; I am interested in the possibilities that can be arrived at when people put their ideas together. There are ideas that have been released into the world of culture that I find important to quote, re-present or re-address. And I think that there are always ideas that we should reconsider. After all, time is a structure constantly moving forward. I am not interested in leaving (any) things behind; I am interested in leaving ideas behind. Like a good recipe, everyone knows what it is, what it tastes like and even how to make it again – perhaps even differently, following their own interpretation; or perhaps it would be a base for something completely different, a possibility.

**STANGE:** In the 90s your work was discussed in the context of relational aesthetics. How comfortable are you with your work being framed in this way?

**TIRAVANIJA:** I am comfortable with frames, and I'm comfortable not to be framed by it. One works as a living, breathing subject. One shifts and changes (I hope) with experience. I think it has become clear by now that everything is relational, even computer pixels. However, I have always had a problem with aestheticizing. To me, that seems to be just another gap, and a gap that I have tried to dismantle. Aesthetics is a Western concept; it separates subject from object. And as I mentioned earlier, for me, no such distinction exists.

**STANGE:** Together with Kamin Lerdchprasert you founded The Land, a project in the northern part of Thailand, where you experiment with alternative ecological and economic models. Can you tell me a bit more about the project and what you are doing there?

**TIRAVANIJA:** Not doing much, but a lot. The Land has now existed for over ten years. It combines different desires: on the one hand, a desire for a safe house – a place of rest, but also a place to think and to have exchanges outside or aside from the normal spheres, a desire for a retreat outside of the grid; and, on the other hand, a desire to experiment with living structures – towards holistic ideas, without idealism, without property, without ownership, and essentially without expectations. It is really a rice field when in season as well as a place for contemplation. It is a landscape upon which to act, a surface on which to build models and a table around which to meet. But it is only those things when

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*untitled 2011 (the way things go), 2011*  
Brick pit, aluminum box, steel plate, shovels,  
broom, wood, stones, earth / Ziegelgrube,  
Aluminiumbox, Stahlplatten, Schaufeln,  
Besen, Holz, Steine, Erde  
Dimensions variable / Dimensionen variabel  
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise

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*untitled 2011 (558 broome st,  
the future is chrome), 2011*  
Plywood, tempered glass,  
aluminum window frames,  
glazed ceramic with palladium  
luster / Sperrholz, Hartglas,  
Aluminium-Fensterrahmen,  
glasierte Keramik mit  
Palladiumglanz  
859 x 391 x 333 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Gavin Brown's enterprise



SPIKE 31 - 2012 *Portrait - Birgit Treussig*

Exhibition view / Ausstellungsansicht »Fear Eats the Soul«  
Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York 2011  
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise



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*untitled 2011 (558 broome st, the future is chrome), 2011*  
 Plywood, tempered glass, aluminum window frames, glazed ceramic with palladium luster / Sperrholz, Hartglas,  
 Aluminium-Fensterrahmen, glasierte Keramik mit Palladiumglanz  
 859 x 391 x 333 cm  
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there is a need and a will for such interaction. It lays fallow when there is no water, it becomes lush when the rain falls, and it becomes impossible when water floods the plains. It is the desire of many, but most of the time it is only a possibility. It is what many imagine it to be – beyond what it actually is. Still, it is there, and it has reached much of its potential, although it has failed in other ways. It was built, and it has fallen. And others will arrive to build on both the failures and the successes.

**STANGE:** Has your teaching influenced or changed your art practice?

**TIRAVANIJA:** Yes, I have been influenced by it. But, no, I would not say that it has changed my practice. Rather, I see it as part and parcel of the practice. I am interested in the exchanges and the possibilities to think and work with others. Teaching is a part of that relationship. It has its speed and its duration, and I want to spend that kind of time thinking and talking.

**STANGE:** Over the past few years, your work has become increasingly political. I am thinking here, for example, of the Demonstration Drawings (2001–ongoing) as well as the mural and the buttons where you ask: Where is Ai Weiwei (2011). How do you explain this development in your work?

**TIRAVANIJA:** I have always been ideological in my approach to art making and the potential of art making, and I have always been skeptical about institutional structures or institutional boundaries. This doesn't mean that I have worked or lived outside the bounds of such structures, but certainly, instinctively, I have always been doubtful. Already since Ronald Reagan's presidency and continuing until now, the political divide present in Thailand has influenced this attitude. Of course, China and Thailand are different in many ways, but parallels can be drawn between the corruption of power and the abuse of information (disinformation) found in each. The rhetoric's and the manipulation of the media, although blatant, are highly divisive. The battle is now being fought for stakes in the future of the country, and the question of a new (republic) state has everyone on their toes. Opinions, innuendoes and rumours are everywhere, and the need to rewrite the constitution looms large. But isn't that the case in many parts of the globe? Everywhere, we feel the shift of power under our feet; how can we not address it, even with our tongues in our cheeks!

**STANGE:** One final question: What are you reading at the moment?

**TIRAVANIJA:** Roberto Bolaño, *The Insufferable Gaucho*; Július Koller: *Universal Futurological Operation* (a catalogue put together by Roman Ondák); Simon Garfield, *Just My Type*. A book about fonts; Roberto Bolaño, *Between Parentheses: Essays, Articles and Speeches 1998– 2003*; Tom Mueller, *Extra Virginity: The Sublime and Scandalous World of Olive Oil*; and *Golf Digest*, the February issue with the »Hot List« evaluating the latest golf equipment.

RAIMAR STANGE is a critic and curator. He lives in Berlin.

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, born 1961 in Buenos Aires. Lives between New York and Chiang Mai, Thailand.

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The land foundation, Chiang Mai, Thailand  
Courtesy neugerriemschneider, Berlin  
Photo: Liz Linden

