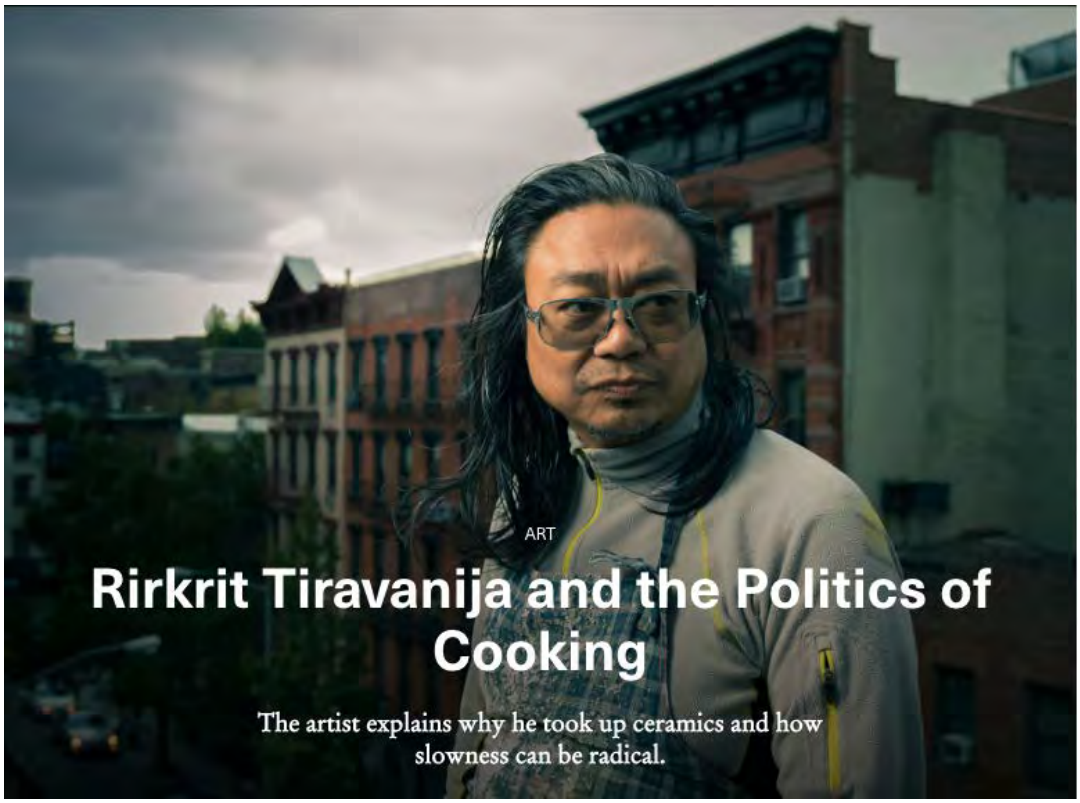
William Hanley, "Rirkrit Tiravanija and the Politics of Cooking," *Surface,* December 19, 2017

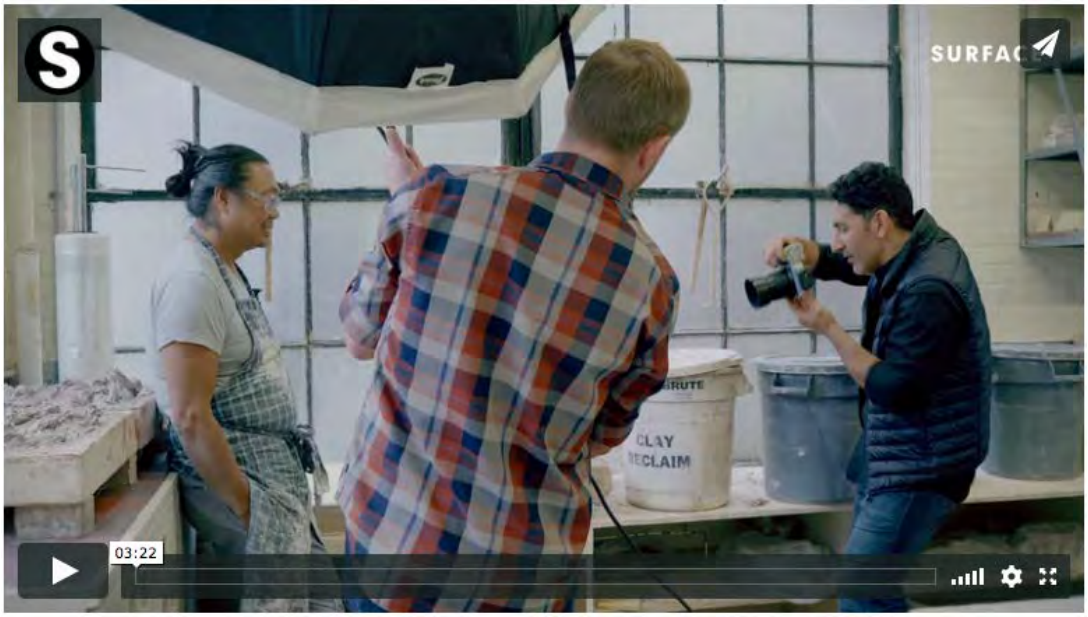
SURFACE



INTERVIEW BY WILLIAM HANLEY
PORTRAITS AND VIDEO BY MO DAOUD
December 19, 2017

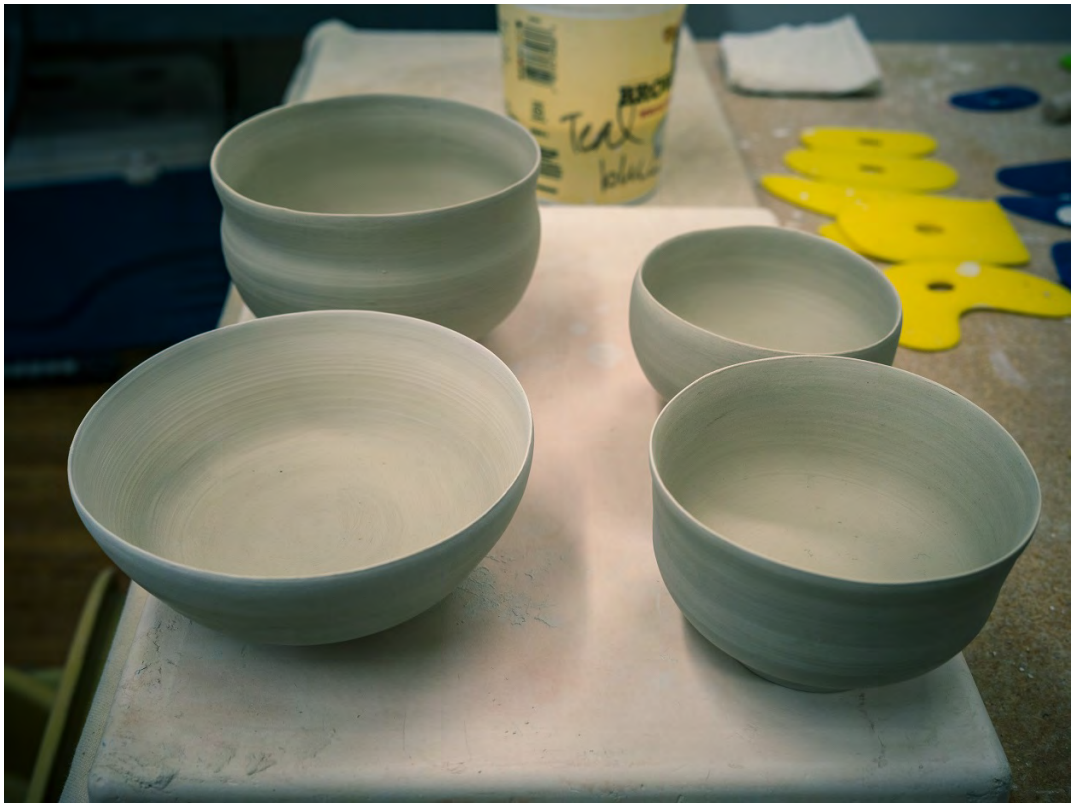
This article is part of our month-long exploration of art and food.

Rirkrit Tiravanija bends over his potter's wheel with the concentration of an ambitous amatuer. As he carefully forms a spinning wad of clay into a bowl, he seems oblivious to the visitors who have just arrived at Greenwich House Pottery in New York City, where he finished a two-month residency in November. His French bulldog, Harry, eyes the guests briefly before going back to snoozing on the floor next to the wheel. When he's finished, Tiravanija holds up his latest ceramic creation, one of a few hundred bowls he's crafted since he began working with clay, earlier this year. Taking a break to talk about the work, he has an assured nonchalance, like someone with a generally strong sense of purpose and direction but no particular place to be right now. "It's kind of like a meditative activity," he says of making pottery, though he's not one to clear his head. "It gives you time to think about everything else you have to do, or could be doing, or dealing with. It's like cooking that way."



Tiravanija knows a thing or two about cooking. He rose to prominence as one of a group of artists working within a strain of participatory art now often gathered under the broad umbrella of social practice. At its core, Tiravanija's work tees up situations that invite participants to interact with one another. This has taken the shape of everything from a 2002 re-creation of his New York apartment at the 2002 Biennial in Liverpool to a pirate television station broadcasting from the Guggenheim Museum in 2005. But Tiravanija is best known for cooking and serving meals in spaces typically reserved for more traditional exhibitions.

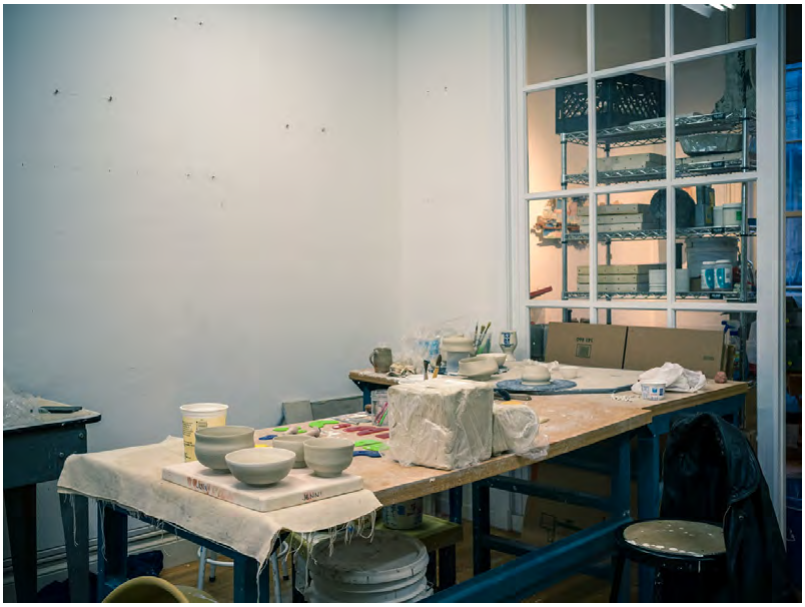
Some of the pottery Tiravanija produced was shipped to Frankfurt in October, where he and Tobias Rehberger sold them, along with a varying menu of dishes, at a temporary stall in the city's historic market. Other pieces may travel to Singapore, Tiravanija says, to be used in a temporary tea house he is building at the National Gallery for a January exhibition there. His ceramics residency coincided with an exhibition at his friend and longtime dealer Gavin Brown's galleries in New York. It featured his archive of Super 8 films, studies of people he has observed over decades, as well as screenings of his remake of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1974 film *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. Wearing a clay-spattered apron, with Harry dutifully dozing in his lap, Tiravanija spoke about how he started cooking and why gathering people for a meal can be a defiant act.



A few of Tiravanija's creations at Greenwich House Pottery (Photo: Mo Daoud).

It's novel to see you sitting at the wheel rather than standing over the stove. Why did you start making ceramics?

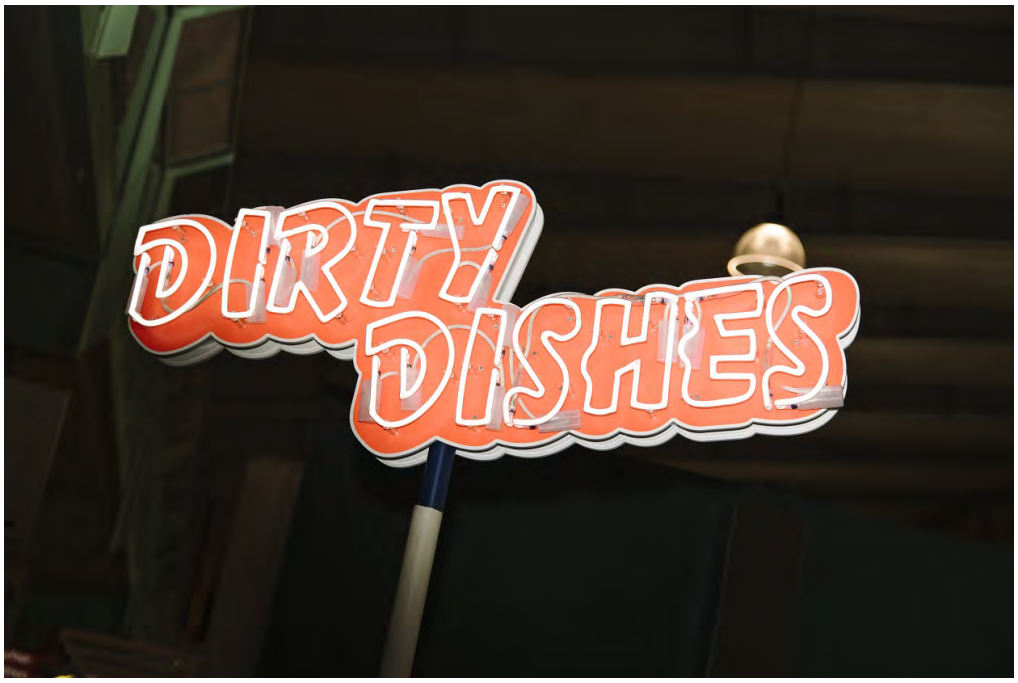
Well, I've been making tea rooms here and there, and I was interested in the medicinal side of coffee and tea, so looking at how to serve it seemed natural. At the same time, it's kind of interesting because I teach, and I've noticed the kiln in the department has become very active in the last three years. I think it has to do with people discovering the material and a getting-back-to-the-earth kind of thing. If we weren't in the city, you could take the clay out of the ground and make everything literally from scratch. And it can also go the other way: You can use the object and return it to the ground. One of the things I'm interested in doing in the future is to make a project where you use the object and then you kind of return it—after you drink the tea, then you smash the cups.



Tiravanija' studio during his 2017 residency at Greenwich Pottery House (Photo: Mo Daoud).

That could be cathartic. Whether it's smashing cups or watching a film, your work always invites people to participate in one way or another. Have you always been a good host?

When I started art school up in Canada, I would [sometimes] make a pot of curry, but it's very difficult to cook when you're alone. You have to make it at least for four, so I would invite friends to come over to eat. And then it became like everybody would just show up every Sunday.



Tiravanija and Tobias Rehberger staged the temporary work “Dirty Dishes”, featuring food served on Tiravana’s ceramics, at Frankfurt’s Kleinmarkthalle. It was presented in 2017 by Portikus, the contemporary art space in Frankfurt. (Photos: Diana Pfammatter)

When did you decide to make cooking part of your work?

It started with an interest in anthropology and archaeology. I was a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, and they have a big Asian art collection. I was sitting there, looking at these things, and I realized that they have been collected: They've become a material for knowledge. Then I realized, well, actually, these things are really everyday objects. In Thailand, we use a Buddha every day in a sense. I thought, What's missing is the life around the object. It goes back to when I was a younger artist thinking about Duchamp's urinal. What do you do after the readymade? After everything could be claimed as sculpture? My answer was to take the urinal, reinstall it, and piss in it. It's the idea of reanimating an object, to put it back into use, to put the urinal back on the wall.

An early work by Tiravanija, "untitled (free)", was shown at 303 Gallery in New York in 1992.

A few years later, I was walking down West Broadway [in Manhattan] one day, wondering what I was going to make for a group exhibition I was in, and I decided I would cook. I set up my things on a pedestal. There was a pot cooking away and some waste from the process in the gallery, and people started to participate, to add their beer bottles and cups to the pile. Then I thought, Oh, everything should just be given away. It should be pushed further, and that's really when I started to give out the food.

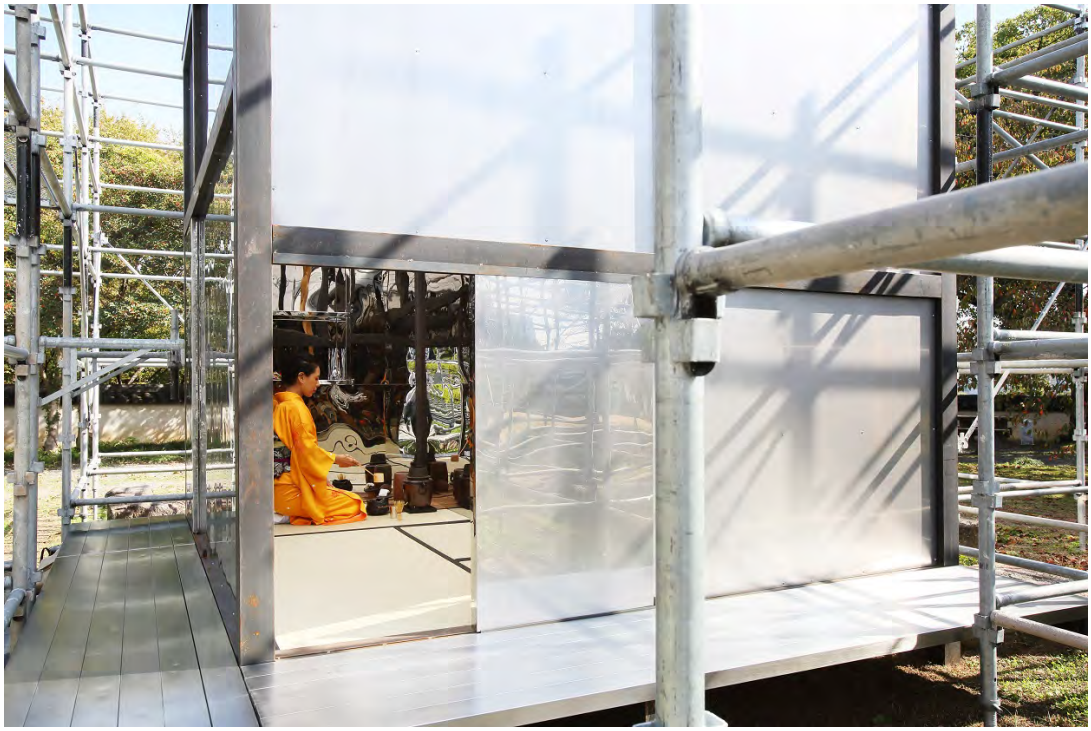
Installation view: “untitled 1990 (pad thai)” at Paula Allen Gallery in New York (1990).

How did people respond to the early projects?

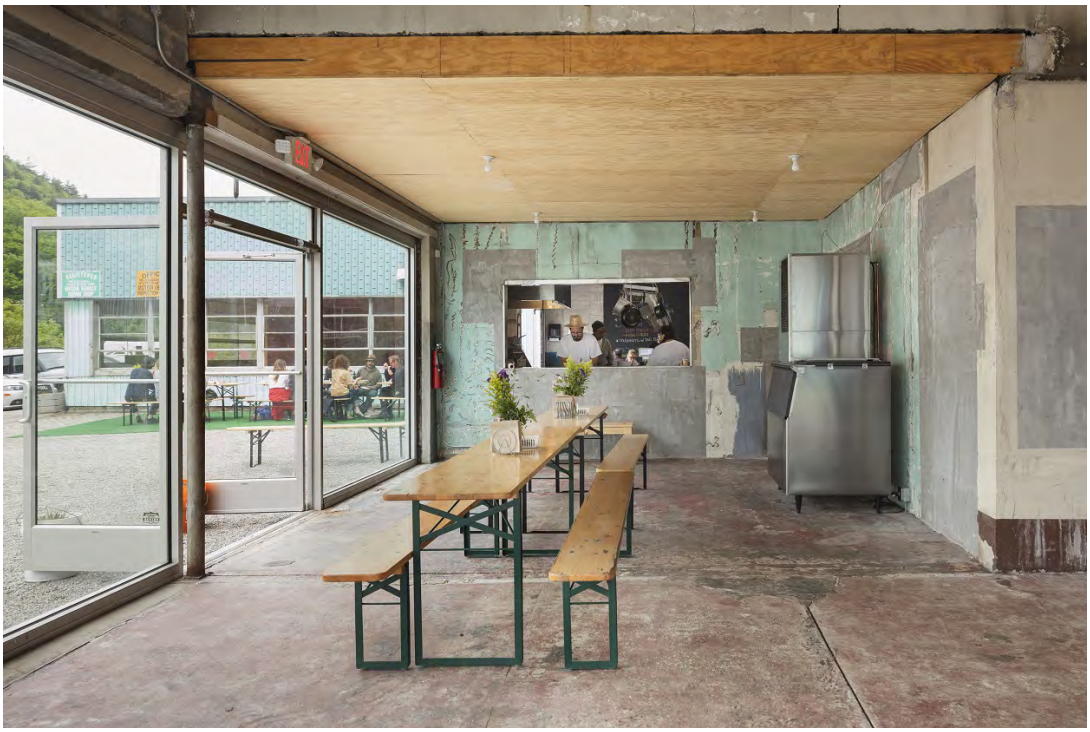
When I started to cook food and serve it to people [in the early 1990s in New York City], the economy was bad and homelessness was big in the city. People started to interpret the work as a kind of comment.

How do you know when you’ve found the right context for a work?

I don’t have a studio. [The work] is always made in the place, with the conditions, with the people, and everything else that will be a part of it. I usually don’t make anything until I have to. By the time I make something, I’ve observed and experienced enough of a situation to realize something about it. Things are floating freely in my head, and when I see a certain situation, this accumulation comes back and starts to inform me about what I need to do. It’s very different to do things in the West than to do things in other places. At least, the activity of what art is, is very different.



Installation view: “(this is A, this is not A, this is both A and not-A, this is neither A nor not-A). Okayama Art Summit "Development," Okayama, Japan (2016).



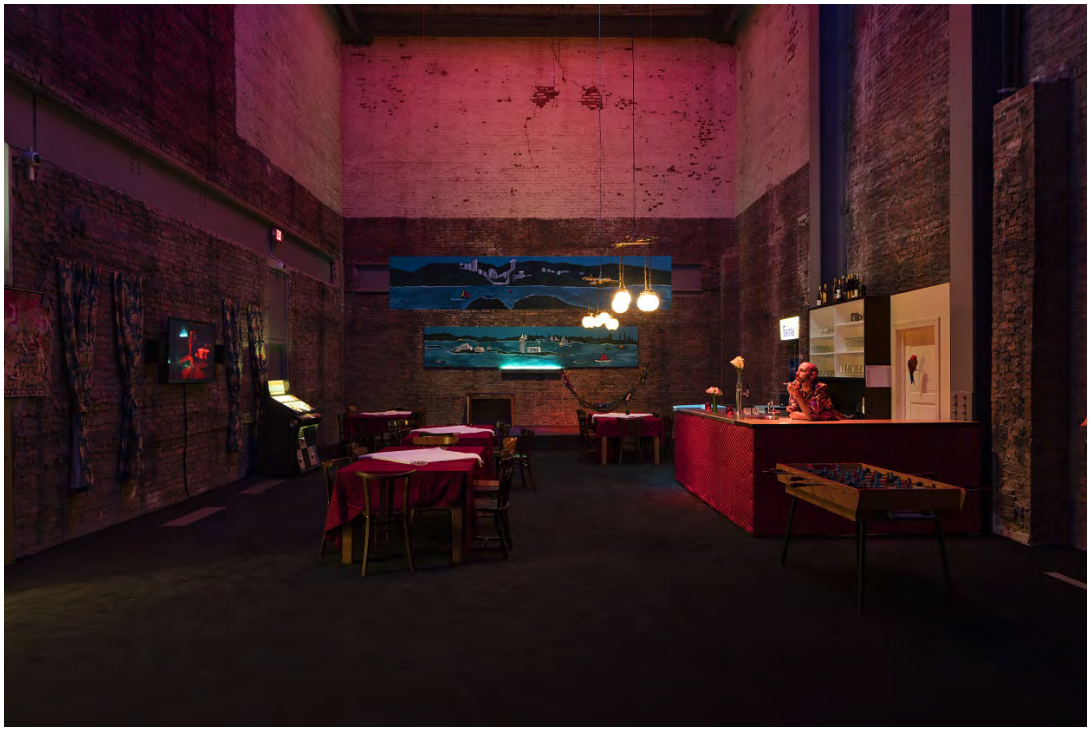
Tiravanija and Gavin Brown’s restaurant, Unclebrother, in Hancock, New York (2017).

Do you use the experiences you create to explicitly comment on those contexts?

I made my first pad thai with a cookbook by a Western woman. One of the main ingredients that she has in it is ketchup. We think it's funny, but the acidity and the sweetness is a substitute for palm sugar and tamarind juice. For me, it was a kind of commentary on a colonial aspect of life, how the West takes on the Other and [brings] it into their home.

I mean, I really appreciate traditional things and traditional knowledge and crafts, but I'm also not interested in drowning in it. When you used to go to Thai restaurants, you were always getting this toned-down, bastardized style of cooking. Today, if you go, they'll ask you for three or four chilies, and everyone goes for four. It's amazing.

I'm interested in the fact that when people have more experience with something, they understand it better. Or maybe it's just taste.

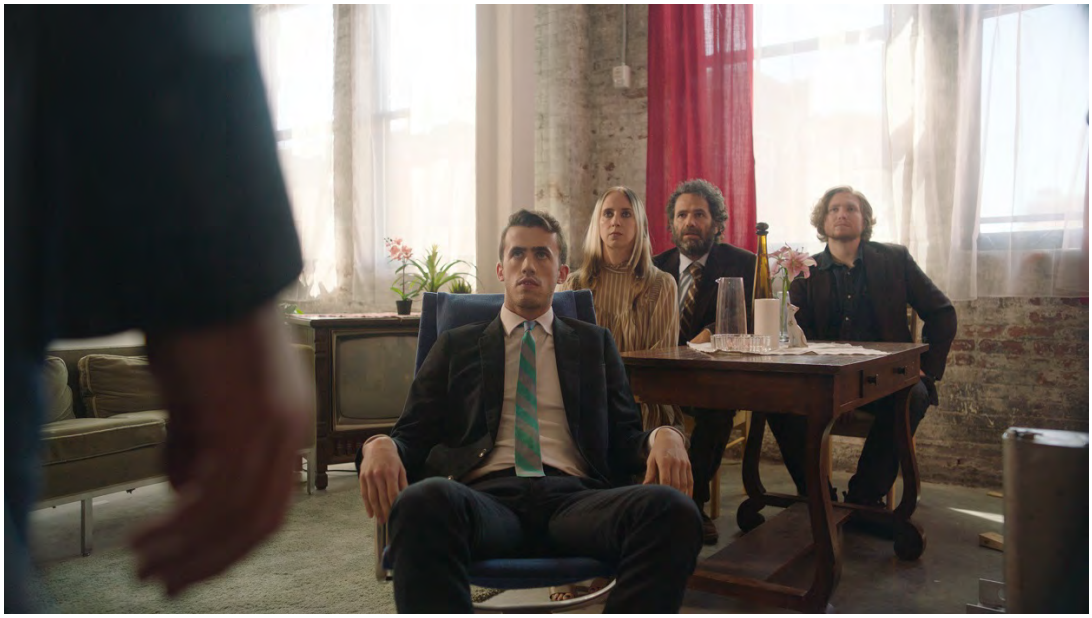


Installation view: "(skip the bruising of the eskimos to the exquisite words vs. if I give you a penny you can give me a pair of scissors)" at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, (2017).

How has that played out in more recent work?

I just shot a new film for the show at Gavin Brown's. We literally shot it in eight days. It's a remake of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. The film has been with me for a long time, and I've used it for twenty years in one context or another. It centers on an interracial relationship, which was [often viewed as] problematic then and is [still considered by some to be] today.

The story is complicated by what's going on around us today, and in that sense, I thought, I have to make this film.



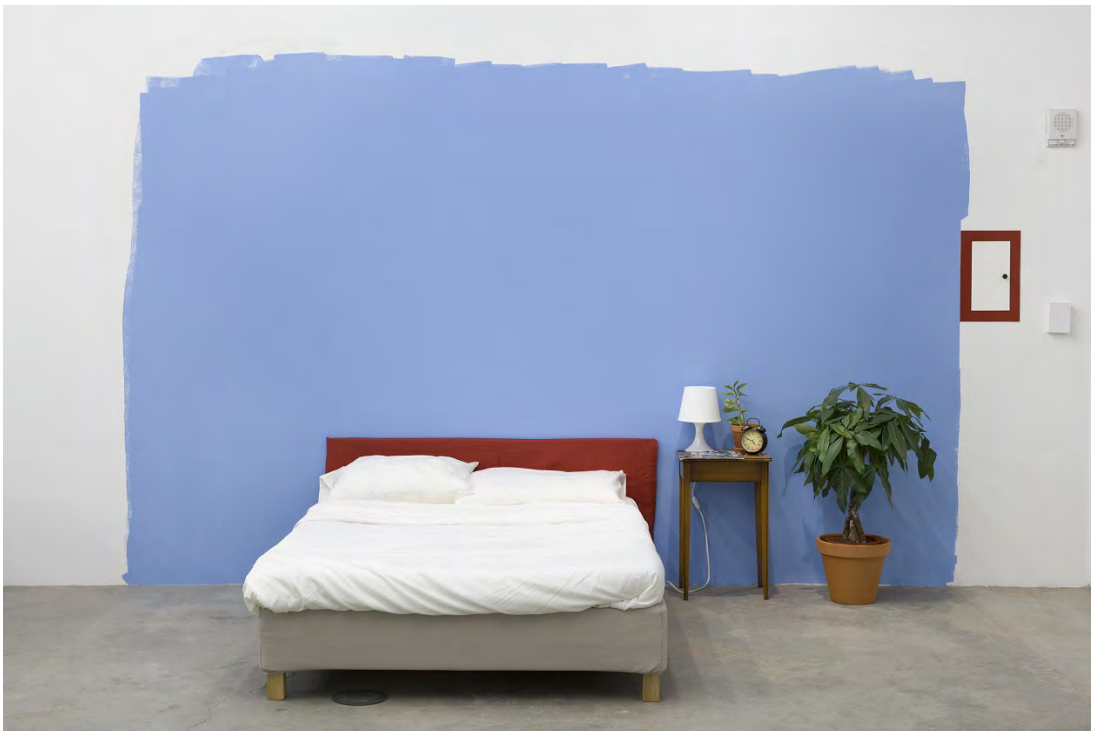
Still image, "untitled (angst essen seele auf)", Tiravanija' video remaking Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *iAli: Fear Eats the Soul* (2017).

What specifically does the film respond to?

Fear of the Other, or fear of difference, is one of the biggest problems facing humanity right now. We're not able to understand ourselves enough to live with the Other. And that's one of the things that people don't realize. We're trying to be ourselves. We're trying to [remain] ourselves by alienating others. It's ignorance on a basic level.

Does your work remedy that?

I would like it to be some kind of antidote. When people are surprised by the fact that they could sit at the table with other people and enjoy dinner and a discussion, that's a little step forward. And to be able to make a space in a place and time for this little accident to happen, I think I would be very happy if I'm successful at it.



Installation view: "skip the bruising of the eskimos to the exquisite words vs. if I give you a penny you can give me a pair of scissors." at Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York (2017).

How has the way people react to your work changed over the years?

Everybody has a camera these days. I stopped making photographs a while ago because I started to realize that there were a lot of people standing in the same spot taking pictures. So I thought, I'm just going to stand here and actually look at everything. I feel that it's important to be sensitive to your environment in terms of your experience and not to give the machine all of your memory.

I guess everything is an Instagram opportunity. But if you make a certain kind of space, a certain kind of time available, people start to pick up on it. I'm interested in slowing everything down so that you can look at the details. The reason I make the things that I do, and the way that I do, is just to give people space to stop and pause. To stop and pause at this point is a kind of transgression.