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Rirkrit Tiravanija [Exhibition Catalogue]

Reeve, Charles

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LEFT: VIEW FROM INSIDE THE PROFESSIONAL GALLERY AS THE INSTALLATION IS BUILT
PHOTO BY TONY HUANG

RIGHT: RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA
UNTITLED INSTALLATION AT THE OCAD PROFESSIONAL GALLERY, 2007
PHOTO BY MARINA DEMPSTER

Untitled 2007 (Rirkrit Tiravanija)

by Jim Drobnick

When Rirkrit Tiravanija decided to inaugurate the OCAD Professional Gallery by blockading its doors, he made the venue's opening into a closing and denied its ostensible *raison d'être*. Equally dramatic is the fact that this show, his first solo exhibit in Canada, also presages a shift in his focus — from the West to Thailand, from the mainstream art world to an experimental community. In both cases, the artist chose to work against the grain of his reputation and challenge the principles on which his notoriety rests.

For almost 20 years, Tiravanija has exemplified the genre of artistic practice known as “relational aesthetics.” The term, coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, identifies the surge of artworks in the 1990s that took the form of provisional, interactive encounters that stressed the social context of artmaking and reception. Tiravanija's extensive focus on audience participation, community, inclusivity and conviviality has made him one of the most influential artists working today.

Several reasons contributed to Tiravanija's intersubjective artworks gaining special recognition. One centred on the notable generosity and hospitality of his cooking

performance-installations. *Untitled 1992 (Free)*, for instance, transformed New York City's 303 Gallery into a makeshift kitchen that served homemade Thai vegetable curry to any and all comers for all seven weeks of the exhibition. Here, a simple but effective culinary event established an inviting framework for random encounters and sociable exchange, something unusual in the rarefied domain of the white cube gallery space.

Another cause for the recognition accorded these works was the artist's open embrace of situations that encouraged visitors to actively participate and generate their own experience. At Gavin Brown's enterprise, Tiravanija's exhibition *Untitled 1999 (Tomorrow can shut up and go away)* consisted of a life-size replica of his East Village apartment, complete with functional kitchen, appliances, shower, VCR and so on, all of which were open to the public for four-and-a-half months, 24 hours a day. People could use the space in any way they chose: for meetings, relaxation, parties, hiding out, trysts, exhibitions, a temporary residence. Some writers attribute the acceptance of such chaotic unpredictability to the artist's Buddhist orientation, yet there is also more than a subtle critique of the insularity and exclusivity of the art world.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

The son of Thai diplomats, Tiravanija was born in Buenos Aires in 1961 and raised in Bangkok and Ethiopia. At the age of 19, he moved to Canada and spent time in Ottawa, Toronto and Banff, graduating from OCAD's Experimental Arts Program in 1984. He subsequently attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. He maintains studios in Berlin, New York and Bangkok and has taught at Columbia University. The sites of his exhibitions include museums and biennials worldwide, such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Serpentine Gallery, the Carnegie International, the Whitney Biennial, Manifesta and the Münster Skulptur Projekte. He co-curated “Utopia Station” at the Venice Biennial. He has received numerous honors, including the Guggenheim Museum's prestigious Hugo Boss Award in 2004 and the Thai government's Silpathorn Award in 2007.

The third reason for Tiravanija's rise to prominence has to do with the variability of his work, which has facilitated a multiplicity of empowering and potentially subversive events. The construction at the heart of *Untitled 2006 (Demo station no. 5)*, for example, acted variously as a stage for performances, lectures, workshops, a fashion show and karaoke competition, as well as a media lounge for screening films. Other works featured a do-it-yourself recording studio, *Untitled 2001 (Demo station no. 1)*; a low-power transmitter that occupied unused radio frequencies, *A Retrospective (Tomorrow is another fine day)*, and a television broadcasting apparatus that defied federal communications restrictions, *Untitled 2005 (The air between the chain-link fence and the broken bicycle wheel)*. In these and other projects, Tiravanija provided a platform that catalyzed a surplus of diverse and improvisational activities. These experiential, participatory contexts blurred the distinctions between public and private, art and life, all the while leaving the outcomes undetermined but geared toward enabling the agency of visitors.

However, Tiravanija's OCAD exhibition marks a radical change in Tiravanija's practice, and a renegotiation of his relationship to the art world. Rather than devising a situation that emphasizes democratic accessibility and opportunity, the untitled installation involves a deliberate denial and withholding of experience. The prominent cinder block walls constructed at the gallery's doorways preclude entrance into the space, in effect closing the gallery. Such a striking gesture reverses Tiravanija's characteristic openness and seemingly annuls any vestige of his famed hospitality. But in surveying his work over the years, it is possible to discern a continuity between the earlier installations that offer a heterotopia of sorts, where the possibilities for self-actualization are apparently unlimited, and the closed gallery. Both treat the exhibition space as a medium to be crafted and meddled with, and both tend to abuse or corrupt the gallery's conventional uses. Closing just tends to be the most aggressive and drastic of such acts.



ABOVE: RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA
UNTITLED INSTALLATION AT THE OCAD
PROFESSIONAL GALLERY, 2007
PHOTO BY MARINA DEMPSTER



LEFT: CONSTRUCTION OF THE INSTALLATION
PHOTO BY BLAKE FITZPATRICK

Ne travaillez jamais

Allowing Tiravanija to barricade the entrance hints at the willingness of the OCAD Gallery to be not only the presenter of work, but also the object of self-reflexive scrutiny. In the history of institutional critique, closing the gallery represents a foundational and continually relevant act. Robert Barry's *Closed Gallery* (1969), in which printed announcements were sent out declaring the closure of the gallery, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Keeping of the Keys* (1973), in which the artist systematically locked and unlocked doors throughout the Wadsworth Atheneum, each exposed the art world's politics of power implicit in the simple act of rendering a door open or not. More recently, Santiago Sierra sealed the front entrance to the Spanish pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale, but admitted visitors with a Spanish passport through a guarded back door, thus underscoring the archaic elitism of nationality at one of the art world's premier international events. Tiravanija's gallery closing alludes to these works by incurring deliberate frustration and denying aesthetic pleasure; at the same time, it insists that the gallery itself be contemplated as a conceptual, social and political entity.

Yet, the wall also accomplishes a tantalizing second task—that of entombing a secret installation within. Playing with notions of epistemological and perceptual limits, the stealth content of Tiravanija's exhibition unnerves expectations of art's presence and availability. The mystery of what lies behind the wall, known only to the artist and his assistant, seems destined to generate speculation and rumour, much like the artist's other ephemeral installations that are at times more discussed than they are experienced. The wall enclosing a secret could be likened to a gallery-size version of Marcel Duchamp's readymade *With Hidden Noise* (1916), a collaborative work that enlisted the collector Walter Arensberg to insert an object into a ball of twine sandwiched between two brass plates. In this case, the artist disavowed his own privileged knowledge concerning the piece in favour of a perpetual enigma. At the OCAD Gallery, interested visitors will be more fortunate. While able to view only the walled-up doors throughout the spring and summer, visitors will be able to enter the gallery at the show's conclusion in September, when the barriers will be broken down in a gesture of dramatic release. After five months of anticipation and conjecture, a social event will mark the renewed access as viewers will be permitted into the gallery for the installation's final four days.

As for Tiravanija's plans to reduce his engagement with the art world, it is perhaps counter-intuitive to recognize that this too is within the parameters of his ethico-aesthetic stance. Forsaking the art world and renouncing the pressures of production, commercialization and careerism, among other

issues, is not an uncommon occurrence for artists, especially those working at the nexus of art and life. Marcel Duchamp, Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano each decided at one point to "give up" art in order to focus more fully on the artful aspects of daily existence (although for Duchamp, this operated as a tactic for surreptitiously continuing his work). When the division between art and life undergoes prolonged interrogation, as it did in the careers of these artists, the balance of one's practice sometimes tips in favour of a merging with everyday life.

In Tiravanija's case, his attention will be focused on a project begun in 1998 called *The Land*. Based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, *The Land* combines students, farmers and local and international artists in a collective and evolving experiment in community, sustainability and pedagogy. Creativity here is applied to developing an alternative mode of living based on ecological principles and new forms of social relationship and exchange. Tiravanija hosts artists who engage projects that tackle fundamental problems, such as agricultural yields, biogas cooking units, composting toilets, electrical generation, or housing made from renewable materials. Given the complexity of the challenges addressed by the collaborators in *The Land*, and the ingenuity required to resolve practical survival issues in resourceful ways, perhaps calling these efforts "forsaking art" is misplaced. Either in or out of the aesthetic domain, Tiravanija offers an innovative paradigm in which life in its entirety becomes the subject, medium and product of an integrated artistic practice.

Jim Drobnick is a critic, curator and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Liberal Studies at OCAD. His writings have appeared in journals such as *Angelaki*, *High Performance*, *Parachute*, *Performance Research*, *Public and The Senses & Society*, as well as catalogues for Aernout Mik (2004), Su-Mei Tse (2006) and Carolee Schneemann (2007). He is the editor of *Aural Cultures* (2004) and *The Smell Culture Reader* (2006), and the co-author of *CounterPoses* (2002) and *Museopathy* (2002).

The inauguration of the Professional Gallery at the Ontario College of Art & Design brings to fruition several years of dreaming and planning. Long before I arrived at OCAD, a sentiment existed here that we should augment our venues for exhibiting student work with a gallery dedicated to showing the work of nationally and internationally significant artists and designers from outside OCAD. Such a venue would build on the institution's legacy by enriching our students' experience and adding another way for us to link with, and serve, the community that supports us.

The Professional Gallery's initial exhibition, Rirkrit Tiravanija's untitled installation, marks two other important firsts: Rirkrit's first solo show in Canada and the inaugural residency in the Faculty of Art's "Nomadic Residents" program. As such, it creates a significant circle by returning Rirkrit to his alma mater more than twenty years after he graduated, at a time when he has become, clearly, one of the world's most influential contemporary artists.

However, as Jim Drobnik eloquently explains, Rirkrit's untitled piece at OCAD defies the expectations we have of him. Though his practice is highly varied, Rirkrit is best-known for elaborate installations that turn galleries and museums into places where we can engage in activities from the mundane to the exhilarating: eating, sleeping, doing laundry, visiting friends, playing music, and so on. These works, unsurprisingly, have given Rirkrit a reputation for wanting to invite all and sundry into the gallery, but the cinderblock walls he has installed at the Professional Gallery's front and back entrances quite decidedly shut us out.

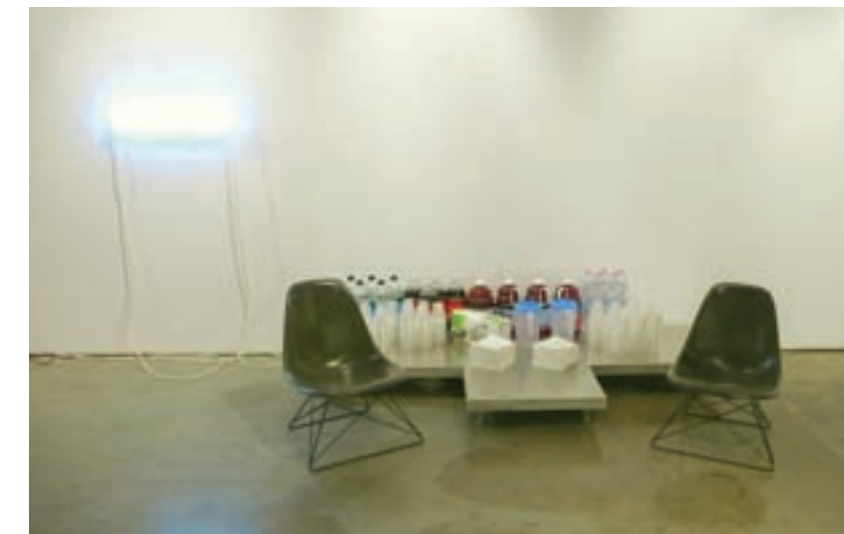
This dramatic gesture, as Drobnik explains, has notable precedents in the art of the last one hundred years, as well as in Rirkrit's oeuvre. But it also connects with some of the ideas that are key to the programming of the Professional Gallery. During the months just before the launch of this venue, Blake Fitzpatrick, then the Dean of OCAD's Faculty of Art, encouraged me to think about the gallery "as a question mark." He meant that we should try to illuminate the suppositions—conscious and not—that we have about what a gallery is and should be: a place to see art, of course, but also a place to encounter design, view films, have a drink, argue with ideas. If we're disappointed about being kept out of a gallery—not that we shouldn't feel let down—then we had expectations regarding the experience we would have had if we'd been allowed in. What expectations? What's been denied? What, in other words, do we think is so great about art? These are the sort of questions that we hope the gallery will prompt about

art and design, about their links and differences, and about a broad spectrum of experiences and endeavours.

Many people have helped the gallery reach the point of being able to raise these issues. Ron Shuebrook, OCAD's past president, and Sara Diamond, current president, were instrumental, as were Sarah McKinnon, vice president academic, and Peter Caldwell, vice president administration. Also key were Cindy Ball and Marian Ruston (Development & Alumni Relations) and Laura Matthews and Sarah Mulholland (Marketing & Communications). A grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage through the Cultural Spaces Canada program enabled the gallery's completion. The Nomadic Residents program was made possible by Partners in Art; thanks especially to PIA's Carol Weinbaum. Nomadic Residents is an initiative of the Faculty of Art where Blake Fitzpatrick, Vladimir Spicanovic, Simone Jones and Anda Kubis were indispensable. And, of course, thanks to Rirkrit and, at his studio, Tony Huang and Glori Linares.

— Charles Reeve, Curator

See Charles Reeve's conversation with Rirkrit on-line at http://quicktime.ocad.ca/professional_gallery/rirkrit.mp4



ABOVE: RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA
UNTITLED INSTALLATION INSIDE THE OCAD PROFESSIONAL GALLERY, 2007
PHOTO BY TONY HUANG



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