

Projects 58 : Rirkrit Tiravanija

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projects



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Rirkrit Tiravanija's art is one of empathy, compassion, and hospitality. It has as its goal the transformation of public spaces into social places that celebrate convivial interaction between people. Over the past five years he has traveled to museums and galleries around the world creating participatory installations that make us conscious of the beauty and pleasure of those activities that make up our lives—eating, drinking, playing, resting, conversing with a friend or stranger. In New York, he converted the back of a gallery into a tiny dining room, serving homemade Thai curry to anyone who happened to visit (*Untitled: 1992 [Free]* and *Untitled: 1995 [Still]*), and pitched a tent in an alternative space and set up a tea bar (*Untitled: 1993 [Cure]*). In Vienna, he outfitted an exhibition hall as a cheerfully decorated coffee house (*Untitled: 1994 [Wetterpanorama]*), and in a contemporary art center in Dijon, he installed game tables, couches, and a refrigerator stocked with drinks to create a recreation room open to all (*Untitled: 1994 [Recreational Lounge]*).

Tiravanija has called these works "parallel spaces,"¹ a description that can refer to both his installations' relationship to the places that contain them, as well as to their relationship to the world at large. On one hand, his functioning lounges and cafés, classrooms and rehearsal studios intrude upon the rarefied atmosphere of an art museum or gallery and serve as its opposite, its alternative, and its foil. On the other hand, the fact that they are on display forcibly sets them in contrast to the "real world" situations they emulate. This tension is a familiar one, recalling the grand tradition of twentieth-century art forms that dare to jump the imaginary ditch separating art and everyday experience.

Most obviously, Tiravanija's work provokes comparison to Marcel Duchamp's transformations of ordinary objects into sculpture not by altering the objects themselves, but by displaying them in a gallery or museum. Like Duchamp's *Readymades*, Tiravanija's works depend



Untitled: 1994 (Meet Tim and Burkhard). Furniture, refrigerator, TV set, videotape, music, drinks, lots of people. Courtesy Neugerriemschneider, Berlin, and Gavin Brown, New York



Untitled: 1995 (D). Detail of installation at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Plywood, videotape, musical instruments, lots of people. Photo: Jerry Saltz, courtesy Gavin Brown, New York, and Neugerriemschneider, Berlin

primarily on their context to set them apart from actual experience. Commenting, however, that looking at Duchamp's urinal never fails to make him want to pee in it, Tiravanija seeks in his installations to render the distinction between art and life academic. In the installation *Untitled: 1996 (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*, to prove his conviction that an evening entertaining guests in one of his museum environments is not substantially different from an evening entertaining guests in his own home,² Tiravanija re-created his entire East Village apartment (complete with kitchen, bath, and shower) at the Cologne Kunstverein and held a round-the-clock open house for the run of the exhibition.

All of these works are primarily experiential, which means that their emphasis is not so much on themselves as art objects but on the viewer's interaction with them. For Tiravanija, as for earlier experimenters with environments, happenings, and performance art, the relation between the artist, the activity, and the visitor have equal importance in the creation of a work of art.³ Without the presence of "lots of people" (his most frequently used medium) sprawling on his sofas, snacking on his food, or preparing tea, his installations have an empty, unfinished air. Unlike most other artists experimenting with these ideas, however, Tiravanija neither forces audience participation nor attempts to manipulate it if it does occur. With a reticence approaching self-abnegation, he leaves the nature of the encounter between the audience and the artist-made situation—in effect, the artwork—up to chance. As welcoming environments conducive to any number of quotidian social activities, his installations never dictate the specific experience one must have.⁴ In *Untitled: 1995 (D)* at the 1995 Whitney Biennial, a visitor to his plywood "gallery" had the option of, in one room, watching a video documentation of a well-known work of performance art by another artist, or, in another, making a live musical performance with instruments that Tiravanija had provided.

Tiravanija's project for The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden at The Museum of Modern Art is a child-sized, glass-walled pavilion that will be used as a classroom for the

Museum's education program. It is the second half-scale structure for children that Tiravanija has built in the past two years. The first, a two-story wood house loosely based on a design by the well-known Swedish architect Sigurd Lewerentz, was erected inside the Rooseum in Malmö, Sweden, and was used as a day care center for the duration of the exhibition. The work in the Sculpture Garden has also been inspired by an architecturally important domestic structure, the 1949 Glass House designed by the architect Philip Johnson and built for his own property in New Canaan, Connecticut.⁵ As a curator, critic, architect, and patron of the arts, Johnson has been supremely influential in defining our notion of the term "modern," and his glass and steel home is, in his words, the "epigone of the International Style" of modern architecture.⁶



Untitled: 1996 (*Tomorrow is Another Day*). Installation at the Kölischer Kunstverein, Cologne. Plywood, contents of a three-room apartment, lots of people. Photo courtesy Neugerriemschneider, Berlin, and Gavin Brown, New York

Tiravanija's house refers not only to Johnson's Glass House, of course, but to The Museum of Modern Art, a space which was designed in part by Johnson and within which the modern style was nurtured. If Tiravanija's Malmö day care center was both a celebration and a gentle send-up of the proud tradition of the Swedish welfare state, his glass house within the glass house of the Museum itself offers an amiable corrective to the "puritanical functionalism,"⁷ austerity, and impersonality of much modern art and design.

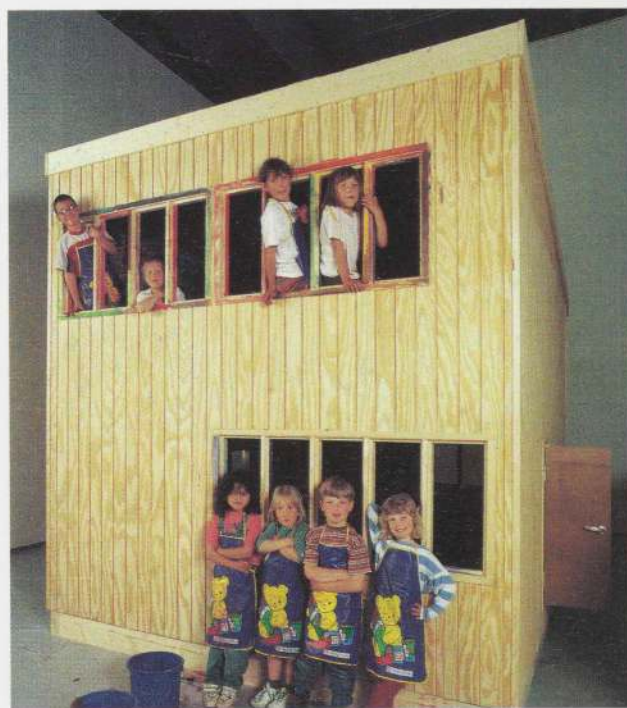
Although this use of recent architectural classics brings to mind strategies of appropriation common to a number of artists of the 1980s and 1990s, there is a difference of attitude—and ego—in Tiravanija's work. "This is not to do with appropriation or copying other people's activities," he has commented about his work as a whole, "but with the way in which it has been necessary to begin again."⁸ Demonstrably uninterested in asserting his authorship over another artist, he collaborates with his source to create a result that cannot be ascribed completely to one or the other. All of his works are the results of cooperative efforts—between the artist and the audience, the artist

and his sources, the artist and the museum professionals, gallerists, cooks,⁹ musicians, architects, and anyone else who will help to make one of his installations work, not just as a model but as a real, parallel space ready to accommodate his guests/collaborators. Tiravanija's house necessitated further collaborations with curators, architects, engineers, and, in preparation for its use as a classroom, museum educators. In the business of transforming spaces, Tiravanija has allowed his house to be transformed in turn by those who have programmed it with activities for children, some of which are outlined on the reverse of this brochure.

John Cage, the composer, artist, and practitioner of chance operations, once commented that art and art-making help us to enjoy life, "so as not to be set mad by it." There is something hopeful, if not curative, in Tiravanija's enterprise, whether he is converting Museum spaces or taxis into non-manipulative, non-intrusive, useful, congenial spaces for human interaction. These works and others like them do not offer refuge from the day-to-day, but rather give us a setting in which to recognize its beauty. With a lack of cynicism uncommon in much contemporary art at the end of the century, Tiravanija's work aspires not to critique but to begin again, aiming toward the larger, vastly more ambitious goal of providing us the pleasure of good company until we at last get it right.

Laura Hoptman

Assistant Curator, Department of Drawings



Untitled: 1995 (Half-scale single-family home No. 47: with interior decorations by children of the Storken day care center ages 5–7). Installation for Nutopi/Nowtopia, Rooseum, Malmö, Sweden. Photo courtesy Neugerriemschneider, Berlin, and Gavin Brown, New York

family activity

For children ages five to twelve and their adult friends

Rirkrit Tiravanija's building is a space where you can create and play in the Museum, look at the world in a new way, and be an artist. You are invited to explore art together by looking and talking about what you see, and then make your own drawing in the outdoor pavilion. Remember there are no right or wrong answers, and enjoy!

- Walk in and around Tiravanija's building. What do you see? Describe the building. What do you see when you stand in the building? What do you see as you walk around it?
- What materials is the building made of?
- Picture the building you live in. How is this one different? How is it similar?
- Although Tiravanija's building is not an exact copy, the artist based his idea for it on a famous glass house designed by the architect Philip Johnson. For part of the

Although drawing is allowed in the glass house, keep in mind that children are not allowed to draw on the glass. For information about Family Art Workshops planned in conjunction with the exhibition, visit the website.

year, Johnson actually lives in a house with see-through glass walls! Imagine living in a glass house. What would it be like?

- Would you want to live in a transparent building? Why or why not?
- Why do you suppose Tiravanija used glass walls for this building in the Sculpture Garden?
- What do you think is unusual or unexpected about Tiravanija's art project?

drawing activity

Imagine your own special play space—a fantasy room you design for yourself. You might want walls made of chocolate, or a cotton candy bed, or a swing set in your living room. Draw your ideas in the space below or on a separate piece of paper. Remember: In your imagination, anything is possible!

Joyce Raimondo

Family Programs Coordinator, Department of Education

biography

Rirkrit Tiravanija was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1961. After high school in Bangkok, Thailand, he studied at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, the Banff Center School of Fine Arts, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. Since 1989, he has traveled widely, creating installations and events in major cities in the United States, Europe, Brazil, Japan, Thailand, and at Biennials in Venice, New York, Lyon, Kwang Ju (Korea), and Johannesburg. He lives in New York.

acknowledgments

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notes

1. Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija, "Forget About the Ball and Get on with the Game," *Parkett* #44 (1995), p. 107.
2. As quoted in Gavin Brown, "Otherthings Elsewhere," *Flash Art* (Summer 1994), p. 103.
3. Ibid.
4. Gillick and Tiravanija, p. 106.
5. The scale of Tiravanija's work, approximately half that of Johnson's House, recalls Johnson's underscaled "Pavilion," built in 1962 as, in the architect's words, "a grown-up version of a playhouse." Adults can experience the childish delight of ducking their heads and entering Tiravanija's house, but its scaled-down size is not primarily for the amusement of grown-up children, but to make it more conducive as a play area and classroom for real ones.
6. Philip Johnson, "What Makes Me Tick," a lecture delivered in 1975 to students at the Columbia University School of Architecture in New York. Reprinted in David Whitney and Jeffrey Kipnis, eds., *The Glass House* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 47. The term "International Style" refers to a revolutionary style of modern architecture introduced to the American public by Johnson and the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock in their 1932 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. Fundamentally utopian in its call for a universal architectural language as simple as it was functional, the International Style embodied the peculiarly modern virtues of "science, disciplined thinking, coherent organization and collective enterprise." As the social theorist Lewis Mumford would write in his contribution to the exhibition's catalogue, scrupulous adherence to these tenets would bring about "the happy impersonality which is one of the highest fruits of personal development." (Lewis Mumford, from his untitled essay in Johnson and Hitchcock, eds., *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition 1932* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1932], p. 180).
7. This is Johnson's phrase, quoted from "What Makes Me Tick," p. 47.
8. Gillick and Tiravanija, p. 108.
9. Although he often prepares the meals served in his installations, he has at times collaborated with professional—and para-professional—cooks.

cover: Untitled: 1997 (*Glass House*). Detail of blueprint architectural rendering by Richard Jansen

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