



**Rirkrit Tiravanija** *Untitled, 1996 (Rehearsal Studio No. 6 Silent Version)*

### *Rirkrit Tiravanija*

From the outset of his career, Rirkrit Tiravanija has directly engaged his audience. In the 1992 *Untitled (Free)*, Tiravanija cooked and served Thai curry to the initially bewildered visitors to his exhibition at 303 Gallery in New York. The activity continued throughout the run of the show with Tiravanija or another artist cooking continuously and countless visitors eating. Besides watching the culinary performance, visitors also got a glimpse of the usually hidden packed artworks, office supplies, and gallery director, as Tiravanija exposed all those normally “back room” elements and relocated them in the front of the space. That early work indicated a number of concerns that Tiravanija continues to explore: the nature of the site where art is produced and exhibited, the economy within which art functions, and the process of making art.

An important part of *Untitled (Free)* was watching the artist cook curry. Assuming the role of performer, Tiravanija initiated the performance and then enticed viewers to participate by offering food in return. The resulting group effort, which extended for days and included numerous people, was the total work of art. In an intimate way, the viewer completed the work by joining in the group ritual of a meal and ingesting food. The significance of the audience in his works is most succinctly stated on the labels that describe the slides of his works. Along with the materials that comprise each installation is the mention of “lots of people” as an essential ingredient in the work.

The performing presence of Tiravanija was crucial in the food works, but in more recent projects he has acted as an often invisible catalyst to outside participation. In *Untitled 1993 (Café Deutschland)*, Tiravanija set up a cafe with tables, chairs, drinks, and books for visitors to enjoy in a private gallery in Cologne. For a group show in Dijon, he assembled *Untitled 1994 (Recreational Lounge)* with table games and comfortable furniture for his fellow artists to relax during breaks from installing the exhibition and later for the audience to use, presumably as a rest from looking at the other works in the

show. Tiravanija's installations emphasize their own functional aspects. An unpopulated Tiravanija installation has an undeniable sense of something missing; only through public use do his works gain meaning.

The issues surrounding how his works function are connected to where they function. For the most part, Tiravanija has located his installations in exhibition spaces. Because his works generally appear chaotic, they seem incongruous with their settings in elegant galleries. The seeming incompatibility between messy installations that include, for example, the remnants of meals or recreational materials and the pristine cube of a space where they are located raises questions about the nature of the exhibition site. The intrusion of normal life activities into the usually reverential space of a museum is unsettling at first. Visitors to Tiravanija's works are often perplexed by the apparently unfinished clutter they encounter. Even upon discovering that, for instance, the drum set is there to be played, doing so in a museum only compounds the confusion for many people. Tiravanija's work questions the neutrality of such a space by encouraging unexpected behavior and by redirecting the viewer's attention from looking at objects to engaging in ordinary activities in that space.

The relationship that Tiravanija sets up between his audience and his work is an active one in which viewers become users and, more surprisingly, do their using free of charge. In a service economy like our own, in which we pay for every effort, receiving something gratis shocks us. The generosity of providing complimentary food or entertainment for visitors undermines the market economy in which art usually functions. To walk into a private gallery and relax in a cafe with a free drink is to subvert the *raison d'Être* of a commercial space in which art is for sale. Likewise, to consume refreshments or play an instrument in a Tiravanija museum installation is to sabotage the preservation function of such an institution. When he does sell the remnants of his installations, Tiravanija wants those elements to function as more than precious objects:

*Basically I started to make things so that people would have to use them, which means if you want to buy something then you have to use it. . . . It's not meant to be put out with other sculpture or like another relic and looked at, but you have to use it. I found that was the best solution to my contradiction in terms of making things and not making things. Or trying to make less things, but more useful things or more useful relationships.*

If the source of Tiravanija's work is the everyday world of eating and socializing with friends, it is natural that his work carry a strong autobiographical element. The meals that he cooks come from his Thai heritage, and he has included a family slideshow in a work. That the food is "foreign" to his mostly American and European audience raises issues about cultural integration no matter (and perhaps because of) how ubiquitous Thai restaurants may be in urban America.

For his *Performance Anxiety* installation, Tiravanija is replicating a recording studio similar to one that he and friends rent at Context Studio in New York. As in the original studio, a set of equipment is supplied for those who want to use the space for rehearsals. The MCA studio, however, is silent. The sound of the electrical instruments is not amplified, and the musicians hear themselves playing through headphones.

Transparent walls encase the studio, so that viewers can watch the sessions but not hear the music unless they wear headphones. At Context Studio, one can request that the rehearsals be recorded for an extra fee. At the MCA, visitors can also record their sessions, but for free. As in his other work, in *Untitled 1996-1997 (Studio No. 6)* Tiravanija offers a normally commercial service at no cost and in an unusual location. Users gain access to the MCA studio not only through normal visits to the museum but also by booking time to rehearse.

The historical precedents for Tiravanija's installation can be traced to the ideas of John Cage and Dan Graham. John Cage's insistence on inserting the chaos and banality of life into art permeates Tiravanija's work, and *Untitled 1996-1997 (Studio No. 6)* is a particularly apt example of his influence. To the viewing public, the predominant sound of Tiravanija's installation is silence and, because of this, it relates to Cage's perhaps best known composition, 4'33" of 1952. In that piece, a performer seated at a piano remains silent for the duration stated in the title, signaling the three movements by raising and lowering the keyboard cover. The see-through barrier in Tiravanija's installation that separates the performers from the audience is reminiscent of the glass pavilions of Dan Graham, with their staging of the spectator's gaze within a transparent architectural framework. *Untitled 1996-1997 (Studio No. 6)* can be seen as merging the concerns of these artists with Tiravanija's own up-to-date pop sensibility.

With *Untitled 1996-1997 (Studio No. 6)*, as in his other works, Tiravanija proposes his own model of what an artwork is. Rather than resolved objects, he offers potential situations. In place of passive contemplation, he proposes social interaction. As Tiravanija has said,

*My feeling has always been that everyone makes a work—including the people who take it to re-use it. When I say re-use it, I mean just use it.*

Rirkrit Tiravanija was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1961. After high school in Bangkok, Thailand, he studied at the Ontario School of Art in Toronto, the Banff Center School of Fine Arts, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Whitney Independent Studies Program in New York. He has exhibited widely, including solo shows at Kunsthalle Basel, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Portikus, Frankfurt; and Secession, Vienna. For the 50th International Venice Biennale (2003), he co-curated *Utopia Station*, which has since traveled to several venues, most recently opening at the Haus der Kunst, Munich. Since 1998, Tiravanija has also been working on *The Land*, a large-scale collaborative and transdisciplinary project near Chiang Mai, Thailand. Tiravanija is the winner of the 2004 Hugo Boss Prize and lives and works in New York, Bangkok, and Berlin.