

STILL COOKING

Internationally lauded Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija might not be staging as many of his famous cook-ups, but his art continues to offer us food for thought.

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES / PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENYA HEGENBARTH





The art gallery is a place where we hope to encounter the unexpected – precious objects that help us to discover the possibilities of life. And yet, Rirkrit Tiravanija has made a career by subverting that expectation.

His latest show is a case in point. On a mundane level, it is a retrospective marking the tenth anniversary of one of Bangkok's few bastions of world-class contemporary art, 100 Tonson Gallery; but on another it is a sort of Dadaist anti-show that snubs its nose at the sanctity of the precious, haughty, self-aggrandising gallery space. Yes, there are art objects on show, but none of them are hung. Instead, paintings from past shows and the owner's collection are presented in bubble wrap and piled willy-nilly against the walls. Instead of a hushed reverence and eyes fixed on walls, this is an exhibition where gallery-goers gingerly squeeze past one another and try not to trip over things.

Rirkrit thrives on such deceptively simple transgressions. Over the years, he has turned galleries into full-scale replicas of his apartment. Or a studio where street TV is broadcast to the neighbourhood. Or a shop where assistants screen print white T-shirts with block print headlines that range from political to absurd. Or, in the case of his landmark 1992 show, "Untitled (Free)," into a makeshift kitchen where he cooked and served Thai curry for free.

Arguably, the only artist who trumps him in the iconoclast stakes is Marcel Duchamp, the prankster who, in 1917, changed the rules of the art game by presenting a porcelain urinal at the inaugural Society of Independent

Artists exhibition in New York. However, whereas Duchamp's "Fountain" blurred the boundary between art and mundane objects, or ready-mades, and so paved the way for conceptual art as we know it, Rirkrit's material is the intangible stuff of everyday life – raw experience.

"With my work I am pissing in Duchamp's urinal," he once told a BBC journalist. A throwaway comment? "Not at all," he says, beaming his impish, Cheshire cat grin.

"Duchamp's urinal marked the end of art-making in one sense and the start of something new. That object or that idea can be understood in a very expansive way. It removed the necessity of certain things – the painterly hand, etc – and allowed us to think afresh about making things."

As well as signposting the main inspiration of his steadfast conceptualism, the quote's scatological image is also useful. It highlights how his work took the logical next step – extended the outcome of Duchamp's brazen act, which liberated art by introducing the notion that anything can be art, to the realm of human agency. "To piss into it is to use it," he says. "Usage is a very important

part of my work. Through usage, as Wittgenstein would say, you get the meaning, so my description of pissing into the urinal is about extending that."

Still with us? If Rirkrit's practice sounds esoteric, there's no way to sugarcoat, it is. Or at least the theoretic nuts and bolts can be. You could just simply say, as art historian Rochelle Steiner did, that his work "is fundamentally about bringing people together" and leave



Marcel Duchamp, "Fountain"

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it at that. Stepping things up a notch: “Tiravanija is a catalyst; he creates situations in which visitors are invited to participate or perform. In turn, their shared experiences activate the artwork, giving it meaning and altering its form.” Or, if feeling really ambitious, you could pick up a copy of French theorist Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, the book titled after the movement he coined. But let’s keep it simple. All one really needs to know is that books have been written, -isms bandied around, and that, to his amusement, Rirkrit has become known as the cook-up or relational art guy. Oh, and that it all started with a few plates of curry.

What made him decide, back in 1992, that eating together could be art? “Initially it had a lot to do with anthropology and archeology,” he explains, “and how Western institutions collect ‘the other.’ Museums are a good example of that – if you go to the Metropolitan Museum, or the Natural History Museum in New York, you see that they’ve been collecting a lot of others. For me, the food was to show that there is actually life around all those things.” But what began as a post-colonial critique of Western institutions quickly became more about the cooking and the conversations – what unfolded in the gaps between objects. “When I was cooking, people started to help me to cook. And then I realised that there’s something really important about that. Ultimately, the relations between people seemed more relevant.”

People who encounter one of these live, anti-art cook-ups don’t always get it. But when they do, boy, they

really do. “It was disconcerting and thrilling to be this casual in a gallery, to go from passive viewing to active participation,” wrote curator Joan Young of his first New York cooking-as-art sculpture. “With this simple gesture, Rirkrit seemed to bridge a mind-body gap that often exists in Western art. Here was a medicine man who literalised art’s primitive functions: sustenance, healing, and communion.” Because for the most part his work can’t



A Rirkrit cook-up

be bought or sold, some also find that the Rirkrit experience makes a refreshing change from the machinations of the market. “It’s a relief not to size up objects or think about sales. Life takes over, commerce fades,” as Young puts it.

Such reactions haven’t been limited to New York art scene insiders, a crowd well versed with the art historical stepping stones that lead us close to relational art, such as performance art, Dadaism, Joseph Beuys, Warhol’s Factory scene, and the do-it-yourself ethos of punk. Over the years, Rirkrit has staged cook-ups far and wide at venues around the world. This includes, to cite a recent example, the opening of La

Triennale 2012, where he transformed the main nave of Paris’ Grand Palais into a 12-hour banquet composed of a single meal of *tom kha gai* soup. Why does he think people react so well to his cook-ups? “Because I think it is unexpected to be given permission to transgress the art. Not everything should be torn down, but I think there are also boundaries that are not real or not necessary. I want people to step over the line.”

Transgressive thrill and free meal aside, what does he think is left behind when the plates of *padthai* have gone cold? “Memory or experience,” he says. “I’m more interested in what people go away with in their heads than the objects left behind. What’s really left behind is just a dirty glass that you can wash and reuse; the conversation that you had over that drink is what I’m really interested in.” You could call it an open-ended and living-breathing form of art, and also utopian, in an anarchic sort of way. Every audience has a creative stake in completing the work, but the outcome is beyond anyone’s control, even Rirkrit’s. “Everybody reacts and remembers it differently and I think that’s very important,” he says.

Rirkrit wasn’t a natural-born artist, or even cook. Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1961, he led something of a charmed early life as the son of a diplomat and oral surgeon. On returning to Bangkok after stints living in Ethiopia, Canada, the US and Germany, all he knew, he says, was that, “I absolutely didn’t want to become a civil servant, which was something I realised watching my father.” Art was the last thing on his mind, he reveals, when he left high school. “When I was 19 I wasn’t engaged in art, or anything at all,” he quips. However, eventually an interest in photojournalism led him to study at Carleton University in Canada.

It wasn’t long, though, before his inner art bulb was lit. “I studied in the history department as a prerequisite to journalism school; but because I was interested in

photography, I also took some art history classes,” he says. “Back then these consisted of three-hour lectures in a darkened room with slides showing all the different -isms of art.” It was in this darkened room, somewhere between the slides of works by Matisse and Rothko, that he discovered Kazimir Malevich’s “White on White” and Duchamp’s “Fountain.” “Those two works struck me in a deep, profound way – so much so that I requested an appointment with a university councillor to see how I could move towards art.” It was in the waiting room for this appointment, while nervously looking

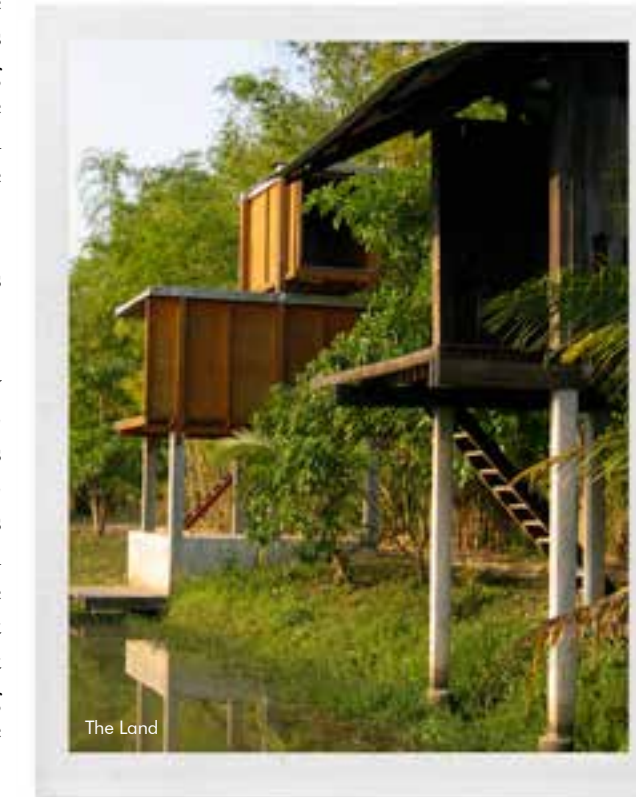
around, that fate struck. “The waiting room was basically a library of catalogues, and I was scanning the shelves and saw a white spine that caught my eye on the bookshelf. And I pulled it out and it said ‘Ontario College of Art, Toronto.’ I leafed through it, took down the address, and the next day made an application. That’s how I got into art school – that’s the beginning.”

After two years in Toronto, New York beckoned. But not for the reason you might think. “Initially, I went because it was warmer than Toronto,” he says. “I had no clue that New York was the centre of the art universe, but my department had a studio programme there so I spent my last two years studying there.” Here

he discovered the museums of art, as so many do, but from the get-go he was never interested in slotting neatly into that scene. “In New York I was never engaged in trying to make Western art – I was always asking myself, ‘What will I do when I come back to Thailand?’, ‘what will it mean to make art there?’”



100 Tonson Gallery's "Ten Years After" Anniversary Show



The Land

Over the years, Thailand’s most internationally recognised artist has responded in myriad ways to this question. And not just with works. Back in 1998, he and another New York-educated Thai artist, Kamin Lerthaprasert, purchased a rice farm in the village of Sanpatong, a 20-minute drive from Chiang Mai. In the intervening years, The Land has served fitfully as a bucolic open space, a collaborative platform where farmers, students and international artists come to exchange or discuss or get their hands dirty. Rice is harvested in the paddies, but something more elusive germinates and grows in the stilt houses surrounding it. Rirkrit has likened the whole quixotic project to “an empty tabletop that people bring different projects to. They can bring [something] to it, use the top, leave things there or take them away.”

Not quite as off-the-grid, but still ambitious is Gallery Ver. This began 15 years ago as an office on Bangkok’s Thonburi side, but grew to become one of the capital’s most defiantly experimental spaces. “Initially we were producing a magazine, *Ver*, but at some point we realised that the younger artists I was working with didn’t really have a venue to show their work,” he says. “And other alternative spaces that were important to us, like Project 304 or About Café, had run into a wall, because there just wasn’t enough support to keep them going.” After relocating to Tanao Road, and a short stint in one of the gritty warehouses at Talad Rot Fai, the recently demolished railway market, Gallery Ver is now on hiatus – but still pops up now and then.

A global nomad who flits between new projects, teaching at Columbia University, and Thailand, Rirkrit is well placed to survey Bangkok’s art scene. What does

he make of it? “It’s very vibrant,” he says. “For a small place we have a lot of really interesting young artists who are well acknowledged by the Western art world.” The lack of a proper art market is something that needs to be addressed with “support and engagement,” he adds, but in a way this is liberating. “Even though the art circuit is not complete, artists can be challenging and be open and say things that are pushing the boundaries.” The fact that, unlike in say New York or Singapore, cold hard cash doesn’t rule is healthy, he thinks, for the integrity of the work. “Contemporary art is about finding new ideas and what the condition is at the moment, and in the big art centres the condition at the moment is the market. It’s great to be a Thai artist right now because you don’t have that situation.” Thailand’s turbulent politics, and the “impetus to address that,” also gives Thai art added vibrancy and bite, he thinks.

On occasions, Rirkrit has done just that. His only other show at 100 Tonson, 2010’s “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Green?,” was a shot across the bows of this maddening viper’s nest, replete with harrowing paintings of the 1970s crackdowns and servings of red and yellow curries, referencing the colour-coded political parties. In 2011 he also touched on US politics with “Trespass,” a group reaction to America’s Occupy Movement. Participants paraded around L.A. wearing his T-shirts emblazoned with Situationist slogans. Given all this it seems fair game to ask him what he makes of the latest manifestation of Thai people power, which, at the time of this interview, was playing out only a few hundred metres away. Will he be reacting to it? “It’s not that there needs to be a reaction,” he says, hesitantly. “I have my stance, my ideology, but it

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doesn't necessarily mean I feel the need to comment. Yes, I've made work about demonstrations, about lots of people coming together, but I'm more interested in ideas of representation than the politics. I don't believe in institutions – I believe in people. I'm interested in people being able to voice their ideas and have space for that.”

Which brings us back to his social installations – or platforms, as he calls them – aimed at bringing people together. Over twenty years after he started cooking-up art, and the term “relational aesthetics” began being bandied around, there are some who think that Rirkrit's work has become part of the institution, lost its novelty. He even alludes to this during our interview, saying, “The problem with so many things is that we get turned into commodities.” So what next? How to keep the creative juices flowing and defy being turned into a brand?

Forays into objects, more traditional works that aren't obviously “relational,” are one. While he likens the t-shirts and paintings that often feature in his shows to road signs (“you know those 'Jesus is Coming' signs by the side of the road? My painting is engaged on that level”), other purely material works go deeper. Among these, “Untitled 2008–2011: The map of the land of feeling” is one of the most striking. For this elaborate print project he created three, 84-foot long scrolls, each one a strange and dense, psychogeographic map of his life as an itinerant, globe-roaming artist so far.

Another is the moving image. For *Lung Neaw Visits his Neighbours*, Rirkrit rekindled his early flirtations with experimental film to create a slow, visually sumptuous portrait of an old uncle from a northern Thai village. Shot on Super 16mm, it debuted at the Venice Film Festival and was called “one of the year's best films” by film critic Kong Rithdee. “Lung Neaw, who just passed away six months

ago, was a man I was attracted to for many reasons,” says Rirkrit. “I could see life on his face, and that was interesting to engage with, but I was also interested in him because he was somebody in this society that nobody addresses. People talk about poverty, but I don't think they really know what it means to walk for food, to forage in the woods, to live off 100 baht a month. For me it wasn't about talking about that but representing it.”

Above all, collaborations, not cook-ups, are now Rirkrit's focus. In early 2013, he staged “Oktophonie”: a recital of music by the late German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (the audience wore white smocks as an artificial indoor eclipse took place around them). And, at the moment he is working on another film about the eccentric Swedish artist-poet Karl Holmqvist. “For me the condition of making things is no longer an individual act,” he says by way of explanation, sounding like a true disciple of Duchamp. “It's about a co-operative of people. The idea of having my signature at the bottom of the work is no longer that relevant.” In other words, Rirkrit's art is exploring new paths, but remains rooted to life, relationships, the social. ✱

