

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA

Beginning in the '90s,
the acclaimed Thai contemporary artist
reshaped the definition of art
by focusing on social relationships and collective
experiences – often through cooking
and sharing meals.

His analog multimedia actions are more
than symbolic: they create genuine encounters,
social exchange, and human connection –
outside both the art market's
logic and digital
networks.

INTERVIEW BY
JÉRÔME SANS

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA,
*UNTITLED 2017 (FEAR EATS
THE SOUL) (WHITE FLAG)*,
2017, INSTALLATION VIEW
OF “RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA:
A LOT OF PEOPLE” AT MOMA
PS1, 2024, COURTESY OF MOMA
PS1, PHOTO KYLE KNODELL



RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA,
UNTITLED 1992 (FREE), 1992,
INSTALLATION VIEW AT 303
GALLERY, NEW YORK



JÉRÔME SANS — Your work has always emphasized the importance of community, spaces for gathering, and shared experiences. How did you come to view art not just as a vehicle for inner contemplation but also as a platform for social interaction?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I think that's part of my questioning about art. One question was: after the readymade, what comes next? My response was: you use it. Of course, it's a complex issue — there are far more questions than this one. Culturally, there are also many other questions — colonial and postcolonial issues, which I personally came to confront due to my background. But because of that, I also realized something: I feel the West doesn't truly understand the “other.” This stems from the fact that the West has long collected objects from the “other” yet has never really engaged with those people — their sensibilities, mindsets, and philosophies. In that sense, I told myself, “In order to make these objects — or whatever they're trying to understand — truly meaningful, you must create the life surrounding them.” I find that “life,” in fact, more significant than the object itself. So, it becomes a curious intersection between questions of art, culture, and sociability.

JÉRÔME SANS — You're well known for your cooking performances and installations. By bringing the kitchen into the art space, you inject life into environments that are often static or frozen. You also invert traditional social hierarchies and notions of visibility by bringing the kitchen into the open, since cooking is often carried out by invisible, underpaid, or immigrant labor. Would you say this is a political dimension of your work?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — It's connected to the question of where I come from, and to my interest in the periphery, which is where the “other” exists. How do we engage with the periphery? Is it by bringing it inside? Eventually, the center will have to confront the periphery, whether it wants to or not. It's important for the center to

understand that it has to coexist with the periphery and to live with it. This also goes back to my early life as an artist — when I was, in a way, influenced by Fluxus. There was the idea that life and art should be much closer, part of everyday life — deconstructing the hierarchies between objects. That, in itself, breaks down many barriers. For me, that act is already political.

JÉRÔME SANS — Would you say you were influenced by Gordon Matta-Clark's work with his New York restaurant, Food, which he ran for a while?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — Yes, of course. I was influenced by many artists from that time and even earlier. Fluxus was already active in the 1950s, and I'm sure Gordon Matta-Clark was also influenced by it. I was lucky enough to have come to New York when Food was still running. Back then, SoHo was still an affordable place. Of course, it was already getting expensive, generally speaking, but Food was a kind of communal kitchen where you could get reasonably priced, healthy meals — soup, salad, things like that. Those experiences were definitely important to me as a model for what eventually became my work, my interests, and the things I've been doing.

JÉRÔME SANS — Looking back, do you think the meaning of your earlier works has shifted in light of today's increasingly polarized political climate?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — A polarized political climate has always been an issue because human relationships are always complex. How we relate to others is always going to be a challenge. That happens even within a family, let alone outside of the house, right? So, the idea of making any gesture toward better relations is always going to be complicated. And right now, more than ever — to our disappointment — we're still in a complicated situation. Technology has changed our relations with others. On the one hand, it helps us stay in touch and be more connected. But on the other hand, it also alienates us — it cuts us off from physical relationships, from the



RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, 2021, PHOTO DANIEL DORSA

“touch,” meaning real presence. We think we can always reach people, but, in fact, we rarely see them. That’s why I believe technology has created a certain distance between people. And in that distance, it becomes easier for negative influences to slip in and make things worse.

JÉRÔME SANS — You’ve often said, “The work is not the object — the work is the space of social engagement.” How do you uphold this philosophy in today’s hyper-commercial art world, where interaction is increasingly virtual?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I’d say that today I try to do less — in the sense of producing, of being everywhere at once. Doing less is important in order to truly be there: to give more time, create more space, and really be present. It’s important to me to do less so that I can be more present and spend real time with real people.

JÉRÔME SANS — What’s your view on the rise of digital communities? Do you see them as genuine platforms for political and social engagement, or do you think they’re more of an illusion?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I believe digital communities are both of these things at once. Of course, they’re a useful tool, especially when they allow us to build a community or coalition when we didn’t have one in the first place. But they can also be used against that — by spreading fake news or misinformation, which creates division and differing opinions. So, the issue isn’t really with the tool itself, but with how we use it. We need to be much more discerning about the information we consume — we can’t just rely on things we find on the Internet to understand the world.

We need to experience the world directly

understand it. That’s the real challenge we need to address. And I believe art is great at pushing people to deal with that.

JÉRÔME SANS — So, how do you situate your practice within the ongoing digitalization of the world, especially as life becomes ever more mediated by screens? Do you believe that artistic experience can truly exist in digital or virtual form?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I think it can. I often work with experience, but it’s not the whole picture. I could also use technology at some point. I’m not against technology, but it would require inserting time into it. If it weren’t something transitory — like, for example, TikTok — but something more prolonged, with a bit more depth, then maybe one could develop certain kinds of consciousness from it. But the problem is that people don’t want to spend time. In that sense, I believe, we would need to insert time into that technology.

JÉRÔME SANS — Slow it down.

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — Exactly. Slower speed, slower camera, slower movements...

JÉRÔME SANS — Do you see your projects as protests in themselves, or more as spaces for reflection and dialogue around politics?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I see them more like a road sign that you drive by, one that may give you a little nudge as you pass it. So, it isn’t exactly a protest, but it certainly pushes you into a space where you have to think about what you just saw, read, or experienced.

JÉRÔME SANS — You’ve recently turned to making delicate, handmade drawings based on images of political protest. What led you to this shift — from large-scale social installations to the solitary act of drawing? How do you choose which protest images to draw from? RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — It’s a blur of images that just come from the newspaper. I read the newspaper, see these images, and pick them out. They come from a daily structure, which is informational. The act of manifestation is particularly interesting to me because it’s in these moments that people, together, voice something and make their voices heard. By drawing these images, I slow down my relationship to time — unlike with photography, which spreads it out. Taking more time is what I try to encourage people to do, so that they pay a bit more attention to what’s really going on.

JÉRÔME SANS — You seem to avoid digital in your recent work, especially in these drawings. Is this a conscious resistance to the digital world — a kind of withdrawal into analog? RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I’m kind of a real-time analog person. For me, it’s not really a resistance to the digital world, nor a withdrawal into analog. Sometimes, for example, I’ll use the latest digital camera or whatever to make an image or a moving image. But for me, it’s more about how much time you give to what’s happening in front of the camera. I don’t have any problem with technology. I wouldn’t say I withdraw from it — I’m just using it differently. What’s important to me is that people pay more attention to the space within the frame or to the space they’re sitting in.

JÉRÔME SANS — I remember seeing your first ceramics in Beijing. RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I started to make pottery... I’ve been working with clay and pottery, and, of course, to make a bowl or a pot, you have to spend some time before it actually takes shape. It’s like a time machine that’s fixed. But how much attention people pay

to that creation time really depends on how they use it. Then, of course, one starts to see the value of it by using it.

JÉRÔME SANS — Working with clay means embracing uncertainty — you can’t fully control the outcome. It’s the same with our bodies or our minds. We believe we’re in control, but in truth, no one knows what will happen. RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — Yes. And I think that’s an important part of all this.

JÉRÔME SANS — It’s the same with food. You start cooking, but step away for a five-minute conversation, and it might burn. The result is unpredictable. RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — Absolutely. It makes me think of John Cage and his exploration of chance, particularly in his procedure for chance. It connects to the Buddhist idea that things are always moving, changing, and simply being, and that one must learn to let go. One must understand how to let things happen, which is to let life happen. You could try to capture that sense of chance, even digitally. For me, it’s possible to do both.

I try to create spaces for people, spaces where they can slow down, spend time, truly experience. In that shift, just spending a

little more time with one thing, can become more aware of the things themselves, of otherness, and of the presence of other realities.

JÉRÔME SANS — In an era when protests are mostly witnessed through screens or media coverage, what does it mean to draw them by hand? RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — Well, I strongly believe that it will last longer. There’s a science-fiction work by Liu Cixin that’s three books long. The first one is *The Three-Body Problem*. In the third book, *Death’s End*, the people who escaped the impending destruction of Earth went to find a library of human knowledge on some outer planet. When they arrived, they landed and found a hole. They went into the hole, turned on the light, and realized that everything was carved into the rock. Every word was engraved in stone. I think, in the end, we’ll need analog for things to last that long.

JÉRÔME SANS — How do you hope viewers will respond to your drawings of protest? RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — We’re all imperfect, and it’s essential to become more mindful and self-aware. We need to develop a deeper consciousness of ourselves. This process of awareness is truly analog because it requires being in tune with how we feel, how our body feels, and how our system

BOTH PAGES: INSTALLATION VIEWS OF “RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA: A LOT OF PEOPLE,” MOMA PS1, 2024, COURTESY OF MOMA PS1

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, *UNTITLED 1990 (PAD THAI)*, INGREDIENTS FOR PAD THAI, UTENSILS, ELECTRIC WOKS, AND A LOT OF PEOPLE, PHOTO MARISSA ALPER



RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, *UNTITLED 1996 (REHEARSAL STUDIO NO. 6, OPEN VERSION)*, 1996, PLYWOOD, MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, AMPLIFIERS, ARCHIVE OF RECORDINGS, AND TABLE, PHOTO KYLE KNODELL



RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, *UNTITLED 1993 (CAFÉ DEUTSCHLAND)* (DETAIL), FOUR CHAIRS, ONE TABLE, METAL SHELVES, STACKED BOOKS, MIXED MEDIA, TURKISH COFFEE, AND A LOT OF PEOPLE, PHOTO MARISSA ALPER



operates in order to withstand the chaos around us. So, when I talk about fear eating the soul, it’s very much about not understanding ourselves enough. It’s about understanding our soul enough to withstand the differences and not be overwhelmed by them. The more we understand ourselves, the more we can withstand the chaos, the differences, and the otherness around us because we remain stable.

JÉRÔME SANS — In today’s fast-paced world, is there still room for slowness, intimacy, and the shared meals your work often celebrates?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — Yes, there is! For example in Chiang Mai, Thailand, at my house anytime... I believe there are still many places and ways of life where all this exists. We all live at the heart of technology. However, there are still many peripheral places and people who have nothing to do with all of this, living in completely different ways, with different knowledge and alternative ideas about what constitutes a good life. And when we ask ourselves that question, we often forget that the nomadic herders of Mongolia still live fulfilling lives, happy in the sense of what they want and how they exist.

JÉRÔME SANS — Your work offers powerful statements — “we live under the same sky,” “the same, but not equal,” “tomorrow is the question.” How do you see these ideas connecting? Taken together, they feel almost like a manifesto. RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I hope they’re the road sign that jolts you awake, waking you up from your unconscious, self-driven car.

JÉRÔME SANS — They are also very poetical. RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I would say it’s the language of poetry and philosophy, standing in contrast to another kind of language. It’s a language that gives us space to think, unlike slogans like “Make America Great Again,” which do nothing for anyone and don’t claim any reality. I think that’s also an important part of what art is: creating better language

— language that allows us to think together, words we can use to cultivate more soul and less fear.

JÉRÔME SANS — You’ve summed it up in a slogan: “Fear eats the soul.” How do you sustain your optimism — or at least your drive — to keep creating artistic spaces of encounter? RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — I still believe in humanity. I still believe that humans are inherently good and that evil will come and go. But we will exist longer than that.

JÉRÔME SANS — Are there any recent or upcoming projects you’d like to share here, especially those that resonate with the analog world this issue of *Purple* is celebrating? RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA — Well, you know. There’s no real difference. It’s always on.

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