

Rirkrit Tiravanija
Museum fur Gegenwartskunst,
Zurich, Switzerland



Rirkrit Tiravanija. *Auto repair* (1998) 'Das soziale Kapital', Auto repair, Rirkrit (right) with mechanics, August '98

by Rene Ammann

Most artists value the barrier between art and its public, the assignation and maintenance of various roles (e.g., active artist, passive consumer): don't touch, don't smell, art is here, life is there, Ladies and Gentlemen, stay behind the cord. Very few take up the gamble involved in giving art over to general consumption as did Joseph Beuys in his Documenta 7 project to plant 7,000 oak trees and install 7,000 basalt columns, each inscribed with the name of an individual subscriber. That Beuys called into being 7,000 status symbols and an equal number of "Beuys-Tree-Preservation-and-Cultivation Unions" is less important than the subsequent reforestation of Kassel, a town that was sacrificed to traffic circulation after the war.

If one prefers the participation of folks who would rather belly up to a bar then fork over 500 marks so that art can fulfill its social function, then the work of a neo-archaeologist like Dieter Roth is just the ticket. In the three bars he installed, every smile was captured on audiocassette and videotape, empty bottles archived, and discarded pasta boxes were preserved in files. And then there's Jochen Gerz, whose monumental works in public spaces let anybody who cares to do so carve his or her various thoughts on the memory of the Holocaust into a square, lead-covered pillar.

Like the art of Roth and Gerz, the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija also comes into being (or finds its legitimation) largely through use. In his exhibition at the Museum fur Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, the Argentine-born artist built a studio for bands to practice, an auto repair shop, a kitchen, a bar, a seamstress's workshop for fabricating shopping bags, and an affiliate of the monster Swiss grocery chain, Migros.

In the middle of it all, work was being done: two mechanics were pounding away at the car that had apparently served the artist for years, children were screaming, mothers were threatening, visitors were smoking, eating, drinking, and flirting. The division of labor between creation and experience was suspended in favor of interaction, the immediate exchange of information. Most (but by no means all) of the conversations involved art. They went something like this:

Curator Rein Wolfs (at the bar Tiravanija commissioned): Do you want a beer or a Coke?

Journalist: Oh, a beer, thanks. So how'd you get the car into the museum?

Mechanic: With a crane.

Curator: Are you done with the paint job?

Mechanic: Yeah, almost. We'll see if you like it. It's Ferrari yellow.

Journalist: Ferrari yellow? I thought there was only Ferrari red.

Mechanic: No, there's also Ferrari blue.

Journalist: Oh! And how many miles are on the car?

Mechanic: It's hard to say. The odometer only goes up to five digits. Must be at least at 300,000 to 400,000 kilometers by now. Journalist: And what was it like to work for a month in the museum?

Mechanic: Actually, I prefer working in peace.

Journalist: Were you compensated?

Mechanic: No, and it ate up almost my whole year's vacation.

Journalist: All that for art! Do you go to museums otherwise?

Mechanic: No, never. It's not my thing. (The seamstress comes over to change the music.)

Journalist: 1303 please.

Curator: And 0301, I like that better.

Seamstress: I'll do it. (She goes back to her work station.)

Curator: The people doing the sewing are unemployed and have lost their benefits.

Journalist: So they've got work for a few weeks . . . and how were the two mechanics selected?

Mechanic: I've known the car and the owner for ten years. Rirkrit borrowed it every now and then.

Journalist: Rirkrit's not the owner?

Mechanic: No, the Opel belongs to a friend.

Curator: Not as of today, at least. The museum bought the car. When it's repaired, Rirkrit's going to drive to his new exhibitions and make videos.

Journalist: How many videos are there now?

Curator: 75. You're in one of them, by the way.

Mechanic: Are you going to make me a copy?

Curator: Of course, and I'll also send you a copy of the newspaper article.

And so forth. This is how "Social Capital," the title of the exhibition, presented itself. Somehow it all worked. Everything flowed together – the smells in the museum, the aroma of beer, paint, slightly rotten bananas, the signature curry, trash piling up in the container. And at the register at the far end of the institution, a cashier smoked a cigarette and read Baudrillard. Baudrillard? Yes, the book was part of a Douglas Gordon installation that was set up next to Tiravanija's bar. Apparently, whenever anyone got bored, they'd pick up the book.

Tiravanija's exhibition had a further consequence: the Museum fur Gegenwartskunst is funded by Migros, a collectively organized company that donates 1 percent of all earnings to cultural institutions (the museum receives no government funding). On the day of the opening, the institution temporarily rechristened itself the Migros Museum for Contemporary Art. Occasionally, one sees a man or a woman walking around on the streets with the nifty shopping bag from the show, a bag sewn from linen by the unemployed seamstresses and bearing the bold-printed words "Demonstration." Now that the spirits of capitalism seem to rule the world, where will the ghosts of social capital move in the future?

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Translated from the German by Diana Reese.