

*Conversation with Rirkrit Tiravanija*

Ami Barak

**Ami Barak:** Rirkrit, when your name crops up in the contemporary art world, it's in connection with food. You've made yourself known by preparing food for other people, the visitors to the ARC Gallery in New York for instance, or the Biennale in Venice or in a museum like the Whitney Museum and by allowing these to share the special privilege of being at a banquet, a feast. What are the limits of the work of art for you? Where does it begin and where does it end – if there are such things as a beginning and an end?

**Rirkrit Tiravanija:** Well, I never really think about that kind of relationship or privilege in terms of a confined narrative. I like to see it more as a kind of ongoing process. So, people recognize or define me through certain things that I have done involving the use of food, or certain events that featured food. But I think that that's just one small example of where my actual interests lie. And I always think that the work itself is really a lot more important than the food or even my own person within the framework of the work. I think that it's important that it involves other people and that it can foster relationships. I mean, the situation can be defined through the context of art. But it's all very open and fluid for me. I mean, I don't define the relationship in terms of art and life, us and them. I don't see it in this kind of black and white way. I would like to redefine how one looks at the way art and the way life could be – and I could introduce other things into that relationship... you know, let's say from other social and political situations that I am involved in. I would say I definitively am interested in blurring the line, in terms of how art is perceived, you know, in terms of how one approaches what is deemed to be art and the possibility of treating it in another way.

**A.B.:** The filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard used to say that a film is not merely what can be seen on the screen but also – what is perhaps more important – what actually went on during the shooting – the sum total of the relationships and dynamics that were channelled into the film. When I consider your way of working, I have the feeling that you wouldn't reject this principle outright.

**R.T.:** No, I wouldn't reject it. I mean – as I was saying – the whole is an open relationship between the viewer and the work of art. So the whole process that takes place between the moment when I open my eyes and when something actually takes shape – well, whatever I do is also part of the narrative. I mean, whether it's internalised or whether it's happening or not, whether it's ... it always relates to something I'm interested in – perhaps even in representing that kind of relationship within the context of art. I think that you are involved or at least I think that what I do involves both sides of the camera simultaneously. You are looking at a scene which has already been played out,

but in this case you are also playing a role in the scene. It is as if everything were totally involved. I think it's an ambivalent kind of relationship and I have to guide the process of creating art, or one's relationship to what art could be. This is an ambiguous area. You are a part of it and you're in it or you're trying to distance yourself from it. So, I'd like all this to happen spontaneously and I think that I'm creating a number of fixed objects in space. But that stimulates a certain kind of correlation between usage and time, in other words, conditions that go to create a narrative. This narrative can be conscious for the person involved, or it can be entirely unconscious. I think that there are people who look and there are people who are looked at. And this can fluctuate. I also like my position to be rather ambiguous as far as the idea of authorship is concerned, so that the idea of a maker, of someone who made the situation is undermined. I think that we have arrived at a new stage when it comes to what it means to produce art. I don't actually go around thinking about that all of the time. Of course, I am confined by the individual context or situation – for instance, my relationship to the galleries, museums and institutions I work with. But I think it's a kind of open picture, you know. I don't see it as a way of defining my interests and establishing why I do the things I do. I mean, there's a time for personal matters and a time for external things. And this all depends on where you think you are.

**A.B.:** Another aspect of your work is the idea of travel, or a certain predilection for nomadism. Why is geography so important to you and how do cultural references surface in your work? How do you manage to present these voyages without them being transformed into relics?

**R.T.:** Well, I think the way of avoiding letting things become transfixed as relics is to keep moving, isn't it? So, I keep moving. And I think that's part of this idea of nomadism. I mean, at this point in time we are finding ourselves in a situation where we just have to keep moving... We are able to move in many ways, not just physically, but in other ways. I find myself in a position where my relationship to the things I do is defined by this kind of movement or this kind of ambiguity – perhaps a place without a centre, not a position that is fixed but that is defined by a certain cultural relationship, right? I am still defined by myself, which goes to say that I am not really defined. This is part of how it came about. I mean this kind of ambiguity. I was never really in a position to have anything defined for me, from childhood onwards. I mean it in that sense. So, it's more than just work, it's a fact of life. I think that's how it worked out. But, of course, I am still trying to define myself within this mobility and movement on the basis of certain relationships I have to what's around me and based on what I think is, perhaps, a sort of spiritual connection to the world. Now is a time where we are able to move and find different places and assume different positions and this opens up possibilities for other things, you know. I am not actually interested in working on anything that has to be defined in terms of its place of origin, where it was made or where the idea arose. I'm more interested in the flexibility of being able to look at the predicament and situation you're in and then redefine yourself within that context and to go on to communicate that to other people in these places.

**A.B.:** So, do you think that artists should devote themselves nowadays to areas that were ignored by art in the past? Wouldn't that make art even more complex than it already is? Isn't there an obvious need to widen the circle of the "happy few"?

**R.T.:** Ha, ha!

**A.B.:** So doesn't it make sense to devote oneself to areas that were ignored in the past? Would it make art even more complex than it already is?

**R.T.:** I think it should be complex. It should be invested with more and more levels of meaning and opened up. I think there's a lot of things being done with respect to the idea of producing art, making art. I mean, it's... a wide field. And sometimes I realise that I'm just in one little corner after doing whatever I had to do and realising I am just a little part of the whole. But I think it's more interesting to open things up and redefine the situations one's in. I mean, I think that's where art could keep on going in terms of... that is if there is a need of some way of carrying on. Again, I'm not interested in devoting my time to making fixed things. So, I'm defined by what I do. But these things just happen and you try to hopefully redefine the situation you find yourself in and, you know, even enjoy doing it.

**A.B.:** So your work is characterised by listening, perceiving, conviviality, sharing social relationships and less specialised communication, or is this being a little too generous? Doesn't it deprive the spectator of any effort in approaching your art?

**R.T.:** Well, I am trying to deprive them of the usual approach by setting up a different situation. I don't think that I'm interested in everything just because it's new. I mean, I don't think what I'm interested in is actually all that new. If that's the way art functions, then it tries to redefine the way we approach our surroundings and the social situation we find ourselves in. I want people to leave thinking that they must reposition themselves in relation to what is being dealt with. There's a motive to do something or they go away not realising anything. And that's their relationship to it, you know. So, you hope for the best, for something to happen. Not that I'm trying to define what actually should happen – that would be rather difficult. But I think it's the situation we're in. We have to open things up and not keep them locked up. I'm not interested in creating some sort of didactic approach to viewing – after all, viewing should also bring pleasure.

**A.B.:** All your installations look like improvisations. But when one views your work, it is easy to realise that the whole process requires incredible precision so that everything falls perfectly into place and functions correctly. Does disorder in art really need such elaborate planning?

**R.T.:** What was the last part, please?

**A.B.:** Does disorder – well, disorder is perhaps not the best word... Does what looks like improvisation need such elaborate planning?

**R.T.:** Well, I am susceptible to disorder. But my relationship to it is, in a sense, always kind of precise, no matter how right or wrong, it's always right, you know. I approach it with an open mind. So, things just fall where they want to and happen the way they do. You establish a frame of reference, or make some relationship within a certain frame of reference, but it's open and not closed... Perhaps precision is necessary to establish that open framework. And once you can get to the point that things fall into place, it's always working. I think one is always speculating on whether certain things will work or not. But, of course, you learn as you go on and you realise that certain things will happen if you put others in their right places. Naturally, there are surprises, but that's part of the enjoyment and you eventually even begin to surprise yourself. I mean, I am interested in being precise in conceptual terms. But I'm not really interested in achieving some kind of formalistic perfection. And although things sometimes look as if they are, from a formal point of view, hard and precise, I think that this is the outcome of a certain kind of spontaneity and openness.

**A.B.:** And one last question: How do you picture the near future, the turn of the century, indeed, of the millennium?

**R.T.:** Ha, ha! Well, I'm kind of interested in not really defining time and space. What I mean is, things have to be able to change, so you can't define them in terms of when, where and how. That struck me coming here from New York and thinking about what is going on within the art scene and how art is received, or how it is perceived, or produced. You know, I think something has to change and I hope it changes before the end of the millennium. Or at least, they should start thinking about what has to change, because I for one don't see how they can go on as they are at the moment. There are, after all, different kinds of relationships involved and different reasons why these things are being dealt with in the way they are. In the final analysis, I don't think it really has anything to do with art, right? So, that, I think, should be reconsidered. I think that we really can't define ourselves now because we're going to be too old by the year 2000. I mean, for a while we were defined by the idea that we wouldn't live until that time. You know, we were certain that something big, bigger, was going to happen. And now we're not being defined at all, because it's all quite open in fact. Actually, I think that we have to realize that that's a good position to be in and to keep on going, rather than fall into a sort of apathy. It's just another day.

**A.B.:** Thank you very much, Rikrit.

**R.T.:** Thank you.

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