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# TOWARDS A COSMOPOLITAN CRITICALITY? RELATIONAL AESTHETICS, RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA AND TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH *PAD THAI*

**Renate Dohmen**

*Marsha Meskimmon and Nikos Papastergiadis have responded to contemporary art's concern with transculturalism, audience participation and intersubjectivity by re-articulating the cosmopolitan in relation to both aesthetics and globalisation. Dohmen investigates how their cosmopolitanism translates into a mode of critical address and probes this question with regard to the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, a key proponent of relational aesthetics, an art movement of the 1990s championing audience participation and the intersubjective. Even though Tiravanija expressly draws attention to his Thai background by cooking pad thai in the gallery, Dohmen detects a striking disavowal of cultural alterity at the heart of relational aesthetics, which she regards as untenable within the context of the art world's increasing internationalisation. Dohmen demonstrates how relational aesthetics appropriated key aspects of Tiravanija's Thai-derived outlook while asking how a cosmopolitan outlook might redress and repair this marked critical Eurocentricity.*

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## TOWARDS A COSMOPOLITAN CRITICALITY? RELATIONAL AESTHETICS, RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA AND TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH PAD THAI

Renate Dohmen

### Abstract

*Marsha Meskimmon and Nikos Papastergiadis have responded to contemporary art's concern with transculturalism, audience participation and intersubjectivity by re-articulating the cosmopolitan in relation to both aesthetics and globalisation. Dohmen investigates how their cosmopolitanism translates into a mode of critical address and probes this question with regard to the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, a key proponent of relational aesthetics, an art movement of the 1990s championing audience participation and the intersubjective. Even though Tiravanija expressly draws attention to his Thai background by cooking pad thai in the gallery, Dohmen detects a striking disavowal of cultural alterity at the heart of relational aesthetics, which she regards as untenable within the context of the art world's increasing internationalisation. Dohmen demonstrates how relational aesthetics appropriated key aspects of Tiravanija's Thai-derived outlook while asking how a cosmopolitan outlook might redress and repair this marked critical Eurocentricity.*

My essay probes the scenarios set up by the Thai-Argentinian artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, often referred to as the 'poster boy of relational aesthetics' (Perreault, 2011, n.p.) (Figure 1), in relation to questions of alterity and transnational encounter foregrounded in recent re-articulations of the cosmopolitan by Nikos Papastergiadis and Marsha Meskimmon. The proposition is that while relational aesthetics and contemporary articulations of the cosmopolitan share an interest in



Figure 1: Rirkrit Tiravanija poses for a photo for his 2010 retrospective at the Bielefelder Kunsthalle. Photo: Andreas Zobe. With permission.

intersubjectivity and transformative, participatory art events, the latter demonstrates a greater awareness of cultural difference generated by the pressures of globalisation and the increasing number of artists of non-Western origin that now participate in the international art market. My discussion homes in on the question of cultural alterity as a specific and central aspect of the kind of cosmopolitan imagination articulated by Meskimmon and Papastergiadis. It probes what a cosmopolitan critique might look like and what it could add to current debates on Tiravanija's work and the dominant framework of relational aesthetics his work has been associated with.

I will focus particularly but not exclusively on his landmark piece 'Untitled (free)' which was first created in 1992 in the 303 Gallery in Soho, New York, and recreated in 1995 at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, and in 2007 at David Zwirner's in New York (Figure 2). In 2011, the piece, by that time acquired by MoMA, was re-created yet again and went on display in the contemporary gallery where a free vegetarian curry lunch was served every day.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly 'Untitled (free)' has been referred to as a 'time machine' (Saltz,

2007, n.p.) and it certainly transports the 1990s into the twenty-first century. The question is whether the framework of relational aesthetics generated by the French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s can capture the actuality of Tiravanija's art in our own time, or whether a cosmopolitan perspective would be more suitable for exploring its cultural alterity, glossed over by relational aesthetics. I am also interested in the scope of the emerging cosmopolitan criticality articulated by Meskimmon and Papastergiadis in response to the propositions made by contemporary works of art that engage imaginatively with their state of globalised contemporaneity. My essay will offer a brief synopsis of relational aesthetics, as well as prevalent critical perspectives on Tiravanija's work and the relational in art more generally speaking, followed by a discussion of cosmopolitanism as critical and creative practice as formulated by Meskimmon and Papastergiadis.

Bourriaud formulated relational aesthetics in an attempt to create a conceptual framework that would explain the new kind of art that he saw emerging in the late 1990s and that remained, according to him, largely

<sup>1</sup> The piece was on display until February 2012.



Figure 2: Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (free)*, 1992/2007. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise.

unintelligible within the existing critical paradigms.<sup>2</sup> He invoked interactive technologies as ideological frameworks for the new spaces of relationality he saw emerging in the gallery, and proposed his articulation of relational aesthetics as a project of rewriting of art history along the lines of the radical and free relationality envisaged by the French psychoanalyst and philosopher Félix Guattari.<sup>3</sup> The new type of art Bourriaud was witnessing was interested in creating a social environment in which people came together to participate in a shared activity. He referred to this trend as the 'birth of the viewer' since the work foregrounded artist-audience collaborations where artists set up scenarios for the audience to 'use', conceptualising this participation as the completion of the work. Accordingly, in Tiravanija's 'Untitled (free)' it is the convivial consumption of the *pad thai* he cooked in the gallery and offered to his visitors that constitutes the artwork.

Bourriaud contrasts this new role of art – its emphasis on 'ways of living and models of action within the existing real' – with old avant-garde

<sup>2</sup> Bourriaud originally formulated relational aesthetics in response to the work of the artists presented in the show 'Traffic', which he curated at the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux in 1996, where Tiravanija also featured prominently.

<sup>3</sup> In Eric Alliez's view Bourriaud's use of Deleuze and Guattari is bowdlerised beyond recognition (see Alliez, 2010).

utopianism (Bourriaud, 2002, p.13). Citing from Guattari's 'Chaosmosis' he claims a transformative potential for relational art, declaring that the utopian radicalism and revolutionary hopes of old have now given way to everyday micro-utopias of the 'community or neighbourhood committee type' that allow for 'alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality' to be developed (Bourriaud, 2002, p.44). Bourriaud thus invokes Guattari's emphasis on the transformation of subjectivity for societal change, a cornerstone of the latter's ecosophy, in order to commend the conviviality produced by what he termed relational art and its transformative effect on capitalist society. Bourriaud's framework has been of profound influence. In Jerry Saltz's view, relational art's 'public-oriented mix of performance, social sculpture, architecture, design, theory, theatre, and fun and games is the most influential stylistic strain to emerge in art since the early seventies.' Saltz also asserts that relational aesthetics 'reengineered art over the past fifteen years or so' (Saltz, 2008, n.p.). His assessment is underscored by the fact that artists associated with relational art have all launched glittering careers and continue to be in high demand around the globe.

Tiravanija's work, championed as a prime example of relational art, transforms the gallery into a site for

critical re-inventions of sociality. In his piece for the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 1996, for example, Tiravanija reproduced his New York apartment and made it available to the public around the clock. People could make food in the kitchen, use the bathroom, sleep in the bedroom and chat in the living room. In his work 'Untitled 2002 (he promised)', staged at the Vienna Secession in 2002 and at the Guggenheim in New York in 2004, he created a chrome-and-stainless-steel structure intended as an arena for a series of artistic, public and private activities. Blurring the boundaries between art and life, he staged a barbecue on the opening night and turned the gallery into a space for cultural exploration. Participants could avail themselves of Thai massages and film screenings, panel discussions were held and DJ sessions organised on site. For Tiravanija these events constitute the actual artwork which cannot be fully realised without the active participation of the viewer. But while he sees himself as the catalyst for the work, he contests that he determines the outcome (Hermann, 2003, p.25).

The cosmopolitan imagination Papastergiadis and Meskimmon see at play in contemporary art shares relational aesthetics' concern with a wider social sphere. It is interested in a mode of art making beyond the logic of representation that revolves around participation, collaboration and the transformation of the conceptual and perceptual givens through which the world is negotiated (Meskimmon, 2011, p.6; Papastergiadis, 2012, pp.155ff.). The context of globalisation and its transnational and transcultural flows, which thrust individuals of diverse backgrounds into a shared global arena, are generally acknowledged to underpin this shift in aesthetic engagement. For Meskimmon it is therefore not surprising that there has been a 'domestic turn' in contemporary art that seeks to explore the conditions of 'being at home' in a world that is 'simultaneously marked by movement, change and multiplicity' (p.5). Furthermore, as Meskimmon observes, this cosmopolitan perspective has shifted the conceptualisation of subjectivity away from 'monolithic individualism' to critical explorations of subjectivity as 'inter-subjective, intercorporeal practice, embedded within multilayered networks of exchange' (p.6). In other words the subject is no longer seen as entitative and complete but is conceived as 'in process', and as an 'embodied, embedded, generous and affective form of subjectivity in conversation with others in and through difference' (p.6). Meskimmon's notion of a cosmopolitan imagination also underscores an 'aesthetics of openness' (p.7) premised on a global ethical and political sensibility and responsibility at the level of the subject. Her articulation of

cosmopolitanism hence presents a marked departure from the historic conception of cosmopolitanism based on a firmly self-contained individual who travels 'keen to experience the frisson of "the other" through a veil of pleasurable, commodified distance' (p.27).

Papastergiadis likewise frames his articulation of the cosmopolitan in contradistinction to its eighteenth and nineteenth-century incarnations premised on Enlightenment values and the cultured attitude of European elites 'that culminated in the Grand Tour of the ruins and palaces of Western civilization' (Papastergiadis, 2007, p.141). Yet he also cautions that his framing of an aesthetic cosmopolitanism is not offered as a radical alternative to the established Kantian concept based on reason and morality. He concedes that cosmopolitanism always entails both sides of the equation, and holds that it emerges at moments of 'critical intervention through a complex interplay of reasoned and aesthetic modes of thinking' (Papastergiadis, 2012, p.89). His project thus constitutes an act of rebalancing, an unearthing of the elements of aesthetic cosmopolitanism so far obscured by the overemphasis of 'patrician cosmopolitanism' (2007, p.142) on ethical duties and morality. Papastergiadis's notion of an aesthetic cosmopolitanism is inspired by Cornelius Castoriadis's foregrounding of imagination as a primary factor in the creation of all social ideals and key to creating veritable alternatives in the spheres of art and culture. Echoing Meskimmon, Papastergiadis links cosmopolitan tendencies in contemporary art to a shift in attitude towards the other premised on a conception of self no longer defined by a bounded identity but by an openness to being transformed by intersubjective encounters. This constitutes an in-between space linking politics and art through 'the act of relating to the other' (Papastergiadis, 2007, p.146). He also points out that this new conviviality engages local groundedness as well as an emerging global public sphere in a transformative encounter, thus foregrounding cultural translation as one of the key themes of his articulation of an aesthetic cosmopolitanism. For Papastergiadis this imaginative departure, however, also requires a shift in critical thinking. Similar to Bourriaud in the 1990s he points out that our conceptual and critical apparatuses need to adjust and follow these shifts by abandoning the persistence of 'a methodology that privileges the preciousness of the object and the uniqueness of the artist' (Papastergiadis, 2007, p.148).

The reception of Tiravanija's work is a case in point. Despite its participatory agenda most of the critical reviews of Tiravanija's work entirely ignore the experience of the participating audience, focusing

instead on the artist and the work in its concrete manifestation. Audiences seem to feature only when they comprise people of repute. The invitation to come to dinner in connection with 'Untitled (free)' is noted to be aimed at art-world grandees; at least that is the impression given by the reviews who do not mention anonymous gallery visitors. Saltz, for example, comments on the installation as an ideal place to catch up on art-world gossip and reports how he ate 'at Tiravanija's' with the prominent New York gallerists Paula Cooper, Lisa Spellmann and David Zwirner among other celebrities (Saltz, 1996, p.107, and 2007, n.p.). Similarly, with regard to Tiravanija's replication of his East Village apartment inside Gavin Brown's gallery in New York the art historian, curator and critic Katy Siegel comments on how it tended to be mostly famous artists and critics who left 'their nice, air conditioned lofts to hang out in the dirty plywood playpen' (1999, p.146).

Bruce Hainley offers a somewhat different if related perspective. He points out that things tend to 'go well' in these zones of encounter in gallery spaces despite the potential interruptions and complications that the uncontrollable ingredient of 'lots of people' on the whole entails (Hainley, 1996, pp.54–9, 98). 'Something could go wrong' – for example, 'allergic reaction, food poisoning' – or the crowd could 'turn mob' (Hainley, 1996, p.59). Indeed, what would happen to the work if the audience did not like Thai curry? What if they wanted to eat something else, or declined to eat at all? Such questions have led Joe Scanlan to argue that the relational bonhomie in the gallery smacks of repressive peer pressure operating through a latent menace of public humiliation and an in-built control mechanism that he sees as closer to collective anaesthesia than the claimed (micro) utopia (Scanlan, 2005, p.123). Claire Bishop raises yet different concerns by questioning whether the interactions between the artist and the audience are indeed based on a democratic, egalitarian model, as Bourriaud claims. Drawing attention to the convivial nature and quality of the relations that are created by the scenarios of relational aesthetics, she remarks that democratic engagements are based on often conflictual relations as 'a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained* not erased' (emphasis in original: Bishop, 2004, p.66).

Bishop also challenges the 'self-other' conceptualisation she sees articulated in Tiravanija's works and suggests that 'they rest too comfortably within an idea of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness' (p.67). She sees the works as 'cozy' and self-congratulatory entertainment characterised by a feel-good factor,

based on the uncritical assumption of a unified self rather than 'the divided and incomplete subject of today' (p.79). This is a serious charge, as relational aesthetics is underpinned by Guattari's ethico-aesthetics which champions the generation of polyphonic, partial subjectivities that decentre the subject (Guattari, 1995, pp.21–2). If the notion of a unified self could be shown to inhere in the work, its relational credentials would be seriously compromised. Bourriaud is aware of this accusation. Arguing for the democratic claims of relational art on the grounds of its concern to 'give everyone their chance', for him relational art operates through forms which 'are not resolved beforehand' (Bourriaud, 2002, p.58). It is this indeterminacy which, for Bourriaud, allows for the emancipatory effect of relational art. Bishop, however, detects a lack of reflexivity in the claim that viewers are totally 'free' to interact in any way they like with the scenarios created. As she sees it, it 'is no longer enough to say that activating the viewer *tout court* is a democratic art, for every work of art – even the most "open-ended" – determines in advance the depth of participation that viewers may have within it' (Bishop, 2004, p.78).

As far as Bourriaud is concerned, artists can only be held responsible for the conditions they set up, not for the effects these have on an audience free to choose how to respond to them. What matters about the work is the moment of togetherness that is generated, which he sees as 'the product of this conviviality' that 'combines a formal structure, objects made available to visitors, and the fleeting image issuing from collective behaviour' (Bourriaud, 2002, p.83). Bourriaud does not problematise whether the audience's responses are reactive or creative or too consensual. He is interested in a politics of the present rather than the deferred happiness of tomorrow. For Bourriaud the relational shift to a politics of micro-utopias takes issue with a conflictual approach to societal change, which he declares a thing of the past as 'the imaginary of our day and age is concerned with negotiations, bonds and co-existences' (p.45). He calls the separation of political and aesthetics 'absurd' (p.82) and warns that passing judgement on relational art in view of its political effectiveness alone is equivalent to discarding its aesthetic dimensions, thereby distorting relational art and its differenced politics which operates via the aesthetic. In this respect, Bourriaud's position comes close to Papastergiadis's, who champions contemporary art's mediation of new forms of cosmopolitan knowledge as a worthy political project, promoting an aesthetic and hence different but no less potent criticality (Papastergiadis, 2012,

pp.162–3, 175). Papastergiadis likewise argues against an over-polarised thinking, rooting instead for a Deleuze-Guattarian ‘flow from the middle’ that sidesteps the impasse of either/or thinking ‘because the topology of “in-betweenness” resonates with the mode of aesthetic criticality’ (pp.89–91). For Papastergiadis it is thus not a choice between either the market and commodification or a pure, uncontaminated form of art, politics or ineffectual aesthetic gestures, a world homogenised or heterogenised by globalisation, but a passage through the middle which in his view only an aesthetic framework is able to facilitate. Consequently he does not consider it a sign of failure if artists, despite their professed concern with the convivial, fail to escape the capitalist art market altogether, or fall in with the ideological objectives of art institutions.

Discussions regarding conviviality in exhibition spaces however also need to consider the frequent collaborative exchanges between artists associated with relational aesthetics who advocate such interactions as models of positively re-envisioned social relations, that is, ‘the kind of complex interaction that is possible between friends’ (Hoeller, 1996, p.6). In such collaborations the boundaries between artistic personalities are deliberately blurred. A good example of this is the film *Vicinato* (‘Neighbourhood’) (1995), co-produced by Carsten Hoeller, Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija. In the introduction to the script we are advised that ‘separate identities merge into one and divide again’ while there ‘is no clear correlation between an author and character’ (Hoeller, 1996, p.6). This kind of artistic collaboration takes the concept of relational aesthetics a significant stage further: whereas the audience-participants in the gallery can choose to respond in a number of ways to the situations they encounter, artistic collaborations operate on a much more fundamental level as they shape the very articulation of these scenarios. This raises the question whether we are dealing with a two-tier creative system that, on the one hand, celebrates artistic collaborations as creative utopias at the peak of the relational experience while, on the other, regarding ‘regular’ audience participation by gallery goers as secondary, if not second-rate, interventions in pre-determined situations that only offer choices within the frameworks set by the artist(s).

Such questions draw attention to the power relationship between the scenario-setting artists and audience-participants, and are reminiscent of ongoing debates within various academic disciplines about the need to negotiate the problem of ‘speaking for’. They probe whether relational aesthetics’ assumption that viewers cannot overcome their alienation and

create meaningful inter-human relations without the intervention of the artist is comparable to the anthropologist’s speaking on behalf of a silenced ‘primitive’ other. Are Tiravanija’s pieces, however indeterminate, thus ultimately one-way directives, as the participant, put in the position of an inarticulate ‘other’, fulfils an expectation, a role within a certain preconceived artistic scenario? And what if the other talked back and probed the artist in turn, took over the kitchen and taught the artist to cook a different dish? In other words, what if the participants brought their own realities to the site of encounter, and began to relate back on their own terms? How would a contemporary cosmopolitan perspective respond to such concerns?

While neither Meskimmon nor Papastergiadis intends to be prescriptive, they each have a clear idea as to what a cosmopolitan approach might involve. For Meskimmon it includes a commitment to address cultural diversity in an embodied and situated dialogue that is open to change, resulting in a re-conceptualisation of ‘home’ or of ‘being at home’ not as fixed but as ‘processes of material and conceptual engagement with other people and places’ (Meskimmon, 2011, p.8). It would also emphasise art’s affectivity by drawing out ‘dialogic potential in processes of thinking’ rather than continuing to think in terms of ‘objects of knowledge’ (p.9). Papastergiadis’s cosmopolitan criticality raises similar concerns. He refers to gestures of hospitality that are ‘open’, in which both parties find recognition and which represent a positive engagement with the ‘plurality of differences’ that goes beyond the multiculturalist strategy of representing cultural difference (Papastergiadis, 2007, pp.146–52). He also pleads for a re-imagining of the workings of cultural translation, where ideas and values are no longer delineated in relation to fixed locations and specific social and historical contexts, but are recognized in their capacity to travel across boundaries (Papastergiadis, 2012, p.136). In other words, he is interested in the ‘transformative dynamic forged by the interaction of different cultures’ which brings the ‘forces of mobility’ into the frame (pp.136–7), proposing that new techniques of ‘spatial observation and critical concepts for evaluating the subjective states of empathy, trust and reciprocity’ are key to a cosmopolitan critical perspective (p.191).

Papastergiadis also acknowledges the difficulty of critiquing the collaborative and participatory aspect of contemporary art, wondering how one ought to deal with these fleeting moments that constitute the lived experience of interaction. His response to the challenge posed by the ephemeral participatory aspect of contemporary art is to declare his affinity



with the position of Brian Holmes and Gerald Raunig who state that they only write about events they have participated in (Papastergiadis, 2012, p.191). Papastergiadis himself makes a move in this direction by including (some) diary passages in his otherwise more theoretically inflected book, thus gesturing towards participant observation as a critical strategy. He also dismisses prevalent notions of cultural translation as too simplistic, adopting instead a model pioneered by the cultural theorist George E. Marcus in relation to contemporary anthropological research (Papastergiadis, 2012, pp.168–71). Marcus argues that the notion of the superior outsider who can purview and understand a culture from a heightened and neutral perspective needs to be replaced with the recognition that both parties in the intercultural encounter are partners of equal value engaged collaboratively in producing knowledge (Marcus, 2007, pp.5–9). Papastergiadis emphasises mediation which transcends the ‘mere inventory and display of differences’. New generative strategies of cultural understanding are needed that will allow each partner to ‘go beyond their own certitudes’ and participate in a collaborative knowledge-making that exceeds the sum of their previous experiences (Papastergiadis, 2012, p.174). Moreover, echoing Bourriaud, he argues that measuring art’s value on the basis of its achieved or achievable potential for social transformation misses the point and declares that this approach reduces the imaginative and aesthetic dimension of art to the ‘real’.

But how can the new cosmopolitan criticality envisaged by Meskimmon and Papastergiadis be productively implemented in a reading of the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, crystallising cultural specificity in a manner that is responsive to the transformative potential of cultural encounters? I suggest, to start with, by way of Tiravanija’s cultural alterity. This, has so far only been marginally registered, even though the artist’s cultural background quite manifestly informs his work, as evidenced by his serving of Thai food as gallery staple and his declared Thai-Buddhist inheritance. In an interview with Gavin Brown, for example, Tiravanija describes himself as ‘a Buddhist alongside a so-called progressive/modern world that seems to recognize only a particular, Western kind of future’ (Brown, 1994, p.104). This statement offers a conceptual re-orientation by positing a world ‘alongside’ Western normativity. However, the implications of such articulations of alterity are rarely discussed in the critical literature. This appears indicative of the lingering Eurocentricity in the world of art and art criticism, even within a radical framework such as relational aesthetics, which Tiravanija himself helped shape and

which declares the intersubjective encounter – and, by implication, cultural alterity – as its chosen terrain.

Furthermore, Tiravanija explains that his emphasis on the everyday, another core indicator of relational aesthetics, is derived from the Buddhist influences of his childhood, insisting that his preoccupation with human relations is a ‘Thai thing’. ‘Thai society’, he explains, ‘is very communal. Everybody is brother and sister, everybody is mother and father, everyone is family. Your attitude toward life is that you exist in a kind of family. The lady who sells you groceries is like your aunt, the man who sweeps the floor is your uncle, the attitude is one of respect as the other is always somebody who’s in your world’ (quoted in Hermann, 2003, p.28). It would seem, then, that relational aesthetics is more deeply enmeshed with cultural alterity – and, more specifically, with what Tiravanija proposes as Thai cultural values – than previously acknowledged, especially since Tiravanija’s work has been ‘crucial to ... the emergence of relational aesthetics as a theory’ (Bishop, 2004, p.58). Might Tiravanija’s prominence in the movement thus be read as evidence that a degree of cultural transfer from East to West has occurred, that art has gone ‘other’ on the quiet? Or is this the kind of ‘borrowing’ that has long been the prerogative of the West? Except that in this case the artist that has shot to fame due to an appropriation of the East has an international background beyond Euro-America, even if cast in the latter’s image, with some off-centric alterity thrown in for exotic appeal. Finally, while this kind of self-fashioning undoubtedly was a successful strategy in the 1990s, the question is whether the world of contemporary art has moved on sufficiently to allow for a cosmopolitan recasting of Tiravanija’s image, and what precisely such a recasting might entail.

Tiravanija certainly embraces his role in the art world’s culture of itinerancy as ‘art nomad’, the figure of the artist identified by James Meyer as a breed of ‘artist-travellers’ or ‘archetypal travellers of cultural memory’ (Meyer, 2000, p.12). However, Tiravanija presents this itinerancy along Buddhist lines of non-determination, asserting that he is not interested in destinations, but is happy to ‘just land wherever’ (quoted in Flood, 1995, p.119). But as Meyer points out, contemporary art’s concern with travelling ‘wherever’ remains securely tethered within the fold of the art world. Tiravanija’s destinations are not ‘anywhere’; the ‘nomad artist does not “land wherever”’. Moving from one commission to the next, he has a specific destination – a commercial or non-profit space, a Kunsthalle or a contemporary museum’ (Meyer, 2000, p.17). Tiravanija, by contrast, maintains that his peripatetic existence reflects a stance of

'being outside'. For him 'there is always another place, another condition, another situation', and he sees it as the task of art to articulate this perpetual 'otherness' (quoted in Flood, 1995, p.119). In Meyer's view, however, Tiravanija's dispensing of food in art spaces around the world does not reference a condition of alterity, but rather encapsulates the 'mechanisms of exchange of the global art market in which the artist operates' (Meyer, 2000, p.15). In other words, although Tiravanija's itinerancy is performative of the conditions of the global market without much critical address, in his view this is a Eurocentric perspective: direct and conflictual engagements counter his Buddhist credo. 'There is no conflict between capitalism and Buddhism', Tiravanija asserts. 'Being a Buddhist you just let go, you can see destruction in front of you and just accept it' (quoted in Brown, 1994, p.104). In contradistinction to Western models he argues that Thai activism 'takes a largely passive role' and is premised on the monk whose word 'carries a lot of weight' and is 'one of the best ways of being an activist in Thailand' (p.104).

Tiravanija, who now largely limits articulations of his cultural alterity and politics to the cooking of *pad thai* and allusions to his Buddhist inheritance, has in the past been prone to more straightforwardly political gestures. At the Venice Biennale of 1993, for example, he installed 'Untitled: 1271', which saw him serving Thai noodles from a boat. The piece evoked the trajectory of Marco Polo's travel route and, as Pandit Chanrochanakit explains, since 'Bangkok is already well known as the Venice of the Orient his installation symbolized an inter-connection between East and the West vis-à-vis Bangkok and Venice' (Chanrochanakit, 2005, p.13). Similarly, in 1999, while showing at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale as part of the exhibition 'dAPERTutto', he planted a small teak tree near the American pavilion 'just round the corner from the three "great" powers of England, Germany and France' to draw attention to the fact that Thailand was not represented. Tiravanija built a wooden platform around the sapling and christened it the 'First Royal Thai Pavillion' (Saltz, 1999, n.p.). Yet while, in these instances, he took up the Thai cause, the art world never categorised Tiravanija as a Thai artist and continues to see him as a global art nomad. Articles about his work foreground his itinerancy and international schooling, referencing his Thai-ness only in passing.<sup>4</sup> As 'insider-outsider' he thus escapes the limitations of a specific ethnic label, but retains his exotic appeal (Saltz, 1996, p.84).

4 Tiravanija grew up between Thailand, Ethiopia and Canada. He was educated in Chicago and New York and now lives in Berlin, New York and Thailand.

Even if few and far between some critics explicitly reference Tiravanija's alterity rather than subsuming his work and cultural background under the generic umbrella of art world nomadism. Citing Hermann Hesse's Eastern cult novel *Siddhartha* (1922), for example, curators Richard Flood and Rochelle Steiner note that the experience of staging a show with Tiravanija is like being taught a lesson in spiritual understanding. 'Hermann Hesse could have saved himself an enormous amount of soul searching', they suggest, 'if he had simply had the opportunity of working on an exhibition with Rirkrit Tiravanija. The struggles endured by Hesse's protagonist to achieve an understanding that "life is a river" could have, under Rirkrit's tutelage, resulted in a gentle, occasionally soulful comedy of manners' (Flood, 1995, p.115). Should we understand this as an embarrassing Orientalist lapse, picturing Tiravanija as the exotic representative of a mysterious East, as dispensing spiritual wisdom along with portions of *pad thai*? Carol Lutfy certainly thinks so: 'In an age of multicultural star searching he combines a Western education and the exotic ambiguity of the East' (Lutfy, 1997, p.153). In a similar vein, Saltz has stressed Tiravanija's hybrid status. But rather than invoking Eastern mystique, Saltz surprisingly references the Native American ceremonial feast of potlatch, which is characterised by the exchange of gifts, describing Tiravanija as the 'Potlatch-Conceptualist' of the 'art-world tribe' (Saltz, 1996, p.84). What Saltz fails to mention is that potlatch exchanges traditionally serve to reinforce hierarchical societal relations, thus following the trend of Tiravanija criticism that overlooks the power relations entailed in intersubjective encounters as well as the plethora of writing on the gift (see Kwon 2003; Morgan 2003; and Kraynak 2010). In addition, Saltz suggests there is 'a shamanistic side to Tiravanija' that ties him to Joseph Beuys (1921–86) whom he resembles in that he also 'gives of himself' and 'is a kind of one-man travelling circus, a magician who carries his tools with him' (p.85). Saltz also portrays him as a 'medicine man who literalized art's primitive functions: sustenance, healing, and communion' (2007, n.p.).

Tiravanija clearly invites an array of 'other-cultural' associations, ranging from the East to the North-American indigenous West, none of which, however, are pursued in any depth. Nor is the specificity of his Thainess ever examined in detail, or put in relation to the Thai contemporary art scene by Western curators and critics. His at least partially Thai-derived outlook on art making, which underpins relational aesthetics, is not discussed with any reference to his cultural background or Buddhist perspective, but is subsumed under

Bourriaud's mostly Guattarian reorientation of Western aesthetics. Is this, then, yet another example of the Eurocentricity of the international art world at play?

Beatrix Ruf, the director of the Kunsthalle in Zürich, disagrees. In her view, Tiravanija offers an important critique of 'traditional' political art as well as Western modes of negotiating the 'cultural other'. Ruf explains that even exhibitions that include the 'other' in a politically correct way 'still always think in terms of "us" and "them"' (Ruf, 2003, p.10). As far as she is concerned, the convivial situations created by Tiravanija reach far above and beyond multiculturalism's limited binarisms: 'There's a more politically relevant cultural transfer – or cultural integration that doesn't create hierarchies – taking place here than in most "politically correct" attempts to integrate supposedly marginalized artists from supposedly marginalized cultural circles' (p.10). Ruf criticises multiculturalism for framing cultural others as stable and essentialised identities fixed in the image of a differenced authenticity. Multiculturalism positions 'other cultures' in a negative, inferiorised relation to the West outside contemporary interactive relations of art and culture, thus perpetuating existing power relations where the 'West' borrows from the 'Rest' while Western influences taken up by the 'Rest' are seen as derivative.<sup>5</sup> For Ruf, therefore, in 2003 at least, 'cultural integration' seemed the better option, even if it meant disavowing the explicitly Thai contributions to relational aesthetics.

Yet since then the world of art has moved on. Whatever one's position may be on globalisation and its political and artistic world-creative effects, the conceptual terrain of art has been pluralised. A new sensibility towards cultural configurations that are in flux, contradictory and multiply inflected is now in evidence. While this does not mean that power differentials between the local and the global, the West and the Rest, have disappeared, sites of culture have complexified and become more transcultural, loosening the legitimating grip of Western art and art theory on the world (see Fisher and Mosquera, 2004). Reflecting these shifts I will now proceed to apply a critical-cosmopolitan perspective to Tiravanija's work. Notably, despite the global art world's disavowal of Tiravanija's 'Thai-ness' and his own muted references

<sup>5</sup> The artist Rasheed Araeen is a prominent critic of these art world structures and multiculturalist conceptions which he challenged in his 1989 touring exhibition 'The Other Story'. The exhibition showcased the work of artists of non-Western backgrounds like himself who were sidelined by the art establishment because they embraced Western art languages rather than 'ethnic' styles perceived as more fitting visual idioms. He is, however, also adamantly opposed to the assimilation of the exotic other into the new world art.

to his Thai background, he is very much claimed as Thai from within Thailand itself. In fact, as Pandit Chanrochanakit remarks, he has become a role model for young Thai artists who seek independence from the constraints of Thai art tied to a national imaginary via the triad 'nation-religion-monarch'. In Thailand the concept of 'art' in the Western sense developed only in the early twentieth century, initiated by the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (1892–1962) who taught art in Bangkok and encouraged his students to combine Thai with Western styles. More recently, however, contemporary Thai artists have started to challenge neo-traditionalist, politically sanctioned representations of Thai culture, with Tiravanija contributing to this challenge from 'outside' (Chanrochanakit, 2005, pp.9–12). For these artists the 'outsider-insider' status of Tiravanija offers a genuine alternative as Tiravanija is seen to successfully negotiate both the Western and the Thai gaze.

Chanrochanakit reports how Thai critics are baffled by Tiravanija's indifference to the authenticity of the taste of *pad thai*, as the artist adapts to the local market and substitutes whatever he can buy for certain core ingredients that prove unavailable. Furthermore, according to Carol Lutfy and Lynn Gumpert, Tiravanija surprisingly does not excel at cooking, which 'puts an unexpected spin on why he has chosen cooking as the hallmark of his work – and why the art world has eaten it up' (Lutfy and Gumpert, 1997, p.152). Tiravanija frequently hands over the cooking to 'docents and volunteers', resulting in the production of 'a curious American-Thai hybrid' (p.153). For Chanrochanakit, however, this apparent lack of authenticity potently conveys the 'fluidity of Thai-ness rather than the fixity of official Thai-ness' (Chanrochanakit, 2005, p.5). The seemingly innocuous act of cooking *pad thai* thus assumes a critical dimension in the contexts of Thai culture. But whereas this particular perspective on the hallmark ingredient of Tiravanija's art dominates in Thai discussion forums, on the international scene it is largely ignored. Issues of cultural alterity are subsumed in the overall 'goodness' of relational art's convivial moment, a circumstance that a cosmopolitan framing of conviviality would seek to address.

This short exploration of Tiravanija's insider-outsider Thai-ness, which mobilised different geographic vantage points, underscores the necessity for a cosmopolitan criticality to adopt multi-centric perspectives sensitised to how cultural contexts of articulation and display impact on the meaning of works of art. It highlights that the cooking and sharing of *pad thai* reads differently depending on whether it is staged in New York or Korea, Venice or Sydney, Havana or Johannesburg,



Figure 3: Still of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's 'Manet's Luncheon on the Grass and the Thai Farmers' 2008 (video). Reproduced by kind permission of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook.

and cautions that the temporality of its staging will also affect its meaning. A re-articulated cosmopolitan framework of criticality requires critics and their methodologies to respond to the cultural, temporal and geographic situations that inform art works. They need to show an awareness of the shifts in perception, and the encounters with multifarious forms of embeddedness, that the new condition of critical inter-globality entails. But how can a piece that is intended to be participatory adapt sensitively and in an informed manner to local conditions? Can a work of art ever truly be so generic that few cultural adjustments are needed to facilitate its effective display across the globe? The very assumption of such translatability always already predicated on Eurocentric conceptions, resurrects the image of the cosmopolitan as someone who explores the world as an imperialist tourist unilaterally in charge of knowledge production.

As Gerardo Mosquera attests, 'our eyes, ears, minds have been programmed by specific canons and positions' (Mosquera, 2011, p.3). Implementing a re-envisioned cosmopolitan perspective, which does not blindly export Eurocentric views but grapples with the question of how to generate an openness for multi-directional transformative cultural encounters, poses a phenomenal challenge to critics and curators alike. It

is a project that is compounded further by questions of access as art shows are increasingly spread around the globe, yet only the glitterati among curators and critics have the requisite travel budgets at their disposal to keep up with overall developments. Powerful new hurdles and exclusivities with regard to the critical mediation and appreciation of contemporary art have thus emerged.<sup>6</sup> As the 'real' work is now seen to reside in the fugitive moments generated between members of the audience, this also raises new questions about the role of the audience-collaborators. As most pieces' participatory agenda requires the physical presence of an actual audience, such art privileges those who can bodily attend over viewers who, for example, access the show on the internet. What this highlights is a new level of exclusivity exacerbated by the fact that no documentary trace can recreate, democratise and disseminate the intended effect.

This new exclusivity aside, if one chose to take critical cosmopolitanism to its full conclusion, would

<sup>6</sup> Chin-Tao Wu (2009) comments on the new curatorial 'class system' that emerges due to travel-budget differentials. He is highly critical of the celebration of the new global art world, arguing that despite a greater geographical spread nothing much has changed in the art world. For him the 'global' is just a new buzzword to replace 'Western'.

all works of art need cultural translation and cultural mediators for each and every showing? Would this constitute a pertinent articulation of the new cosmopolitan outlook? Such considerations also raise the question of who will be adapting to whom, and how many cultural languages artists, curators and critics will in future need to speak. Or will a global Esperanto emerge – according to Mosquera, inevitably premised on familiar European tropes and conceptions – to create an artistic *lingua franca* for meaningful transcultural communication (Fisher and Mosquera, 2011, p. 5)? Who will be in a position to negotiate this increasingly complex art world and its overlapping artistic and cultural terrains? In short, will this be an art world for a privileged global elite only? All these questions are compellingly enacted by the Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook in her 2008 video 'Manet's Luncheon On The Grass & Thai Villagers', which shows a group of Thai villagers in front of a print reproduction of Manet's painting (see Figure 3). The villagers are struggling to make sense of the image, are giggling because of the nude woman, and comment on what they see from their own point of view, demonstrating their utter lack of exposure to European art and culture. Rasdjarmrearnsook's work interrogates the alleged cosmopolitanisation of the art world, dismissing facile, over-optimistic assessments that the North-South axis is shifting, or that First and Third World differentials in the cultural sphere have begun to blur and diminish beyond the cultural elites.

Given the complexity of the transnational phenomena that need to be negotiated, critical cosmopolitanism must be premised on an attentive and careful encounter, avoiding the headiness of globalist euphoria while engaging patiently with locally specific forms of embeddedness and experimenting with various modes of critical address, as both Meskimmon and Papastergiadis have attempted to do. In its exploration and mediation of cultural imaginaries as spaces of cultural emergence, critical cosmopolitanism cultivates a multi-sited cultural awareness that invites collaboration and connection while acknowledging displacements, disorientation and continuing power differentials.

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## PARALLEL EDITING, MULTI-POSITIONALITY AND MAXIMALISM: COSMOPOLITAN EFFECTS AS EXPLORED IN SOME ART WORKS BY MELANIE JACKSON AND VIVIENNE DICK

Rachel Garfield

### Abstract

*Garfield produces a critique of neo-minimalist art practice by demonstrating how the artist Melanie Jackson's *Some things you are not allowed to send around the world* (2003 and 2006) and the experimental film-maker Vivienne Dick's *Liberty's booty* (1980) – neither of which can be said to be about feeling 'at home' in the world, be it as a resident or as a nomad – examine global humanity through multi-positionality, excess and contingency. Jackson and Dick thereby begin to articulate a new cosmopolitan relationship with the local – or, rather, with many different localities – in one and the same maximalist sweep of the work. 'Maximalism' in Garfield's coinage signifies an excessive overloading (through editing, collage, and the sheer density of the range of the material) that enables the viewer to insert themselves into the narrative of the work. Garfield detects in the art of both Jackson and Dick a refusal to know or to judge the world. Instead, there is an attempt to incorporate the complexities of its full range into the singular vision of the work, challenging the viewer to identify what is at stake.*

In this essay I will be looking at the artworks *Some things you are not allowed to send around the world* (2003 and 2006) by Melanie Jackson and *Liberty's booty* (1980) by Vivienne Dick. I aim to think through the relationship between the formation of subjectivity, art, and the cosmopolitan. In drawing together these two artists in a responsive way, I am identifying a visuality that I would suggest posits a kind of parallel editing as multi-positionality.<sup>1</sup> This argument has less to do with situating these artists within a singular art historical framework (as they inhabit very different milieux) than thinking about what is at stake for an artist in making choices in the production of art. In this case, as in general, my motivation as an artist and writer

<sup>1</sup> I take liberties with the terms here as much as I do with the trajectories of the artists – as I explain through the text.