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## Alone in the Crowd: Appropriated Text and Subjectivity in the Work of Rirkrit Tiravanija

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# Alone in the Crowd: Appropriated Text and Subjectivity in the Work of Rirkrit Tiravanija

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**Alone in the Crowd: Appropriated Text and Subjectivity in the Work of Rirkrit  
Tiravanija**

Much has been made of the interactivity and relationships generated in Rirkrit Tiravanija's work, most often used to exemplify the 'convivial'<sup>1</sup> relational aesthetics mode described in Nicholas Bourriaud's influential book *Relational Aesthetics*. (Tiravanija's work was also depicted on its cover.) Tiravanija's work has been presented, and re-presented, by critics of all stripes as they review and revise Bourriaud's original claims for relational practices, most often re-interpreting the stakes of such interactive art using Bourriaud's main reference, Tiravanija, as their own cardinal point around which to orient their digressions from Bourriaud's path. As a result, Tiravanija's work has become absolutely emblematic of the practice. And while Tiravanija's practice is indeed exemplary of a number of notable aspects of interactive art, that interactivity is just one of two salient characteristics of relational work named by Bourriaud.

In *Postproduction*, Bourriaud's 'continuation'<sup>2</sup> of his arguments commenced in *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud makes a case for the significance not only of interactivity to relational work, but also appropriation. Of these practices that take on the

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics*, Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, trans, Les Presses du réel, Dijon, p 26

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Caroline Schneider, trans, Jeanine Herman, ed, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, p

constructs of existing social environments,

use is an act of micropirating that constitutes postproduction.... Starting with the language imposed upon us (the *system* of production), we construct our own sentences (*acts* of everyday life), thereby reappropriating for ourselves, through these clandestine microbricolages, the last word in the productive chain.... Appropriation is indeed the first stage of postproduction.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Bourriaud presents relational works, literally and figuratively, as a long chain of mixed-metaphors, set in motion by appropriation.

In this paper, I will look at Tiravanija's relationship to appropriation (the other side of the relational coin) since, like interactivity, it is a cornerstone of his practice, manifesting in his installations, videos, prints, paintings and, notably, in his work with text. One immediate complication to understanding Tiravanija's practice as appropriation, and perhaps an explanation for why the interactivity of his relational work is more widely discussed, is related to the way appropriation itself has been theorised. 'Appropriation art' generally refers to practices theorised in relation to postmodernism, which characterise appropriation's recontextualisation of an element from an external site into the frame of an artwork as a critical engagement with authorship. But while appropriation has had a long and varied history in many diverse cultures, from the reverent *linmo* practice in traditional Chinese painting<sup>4</sup> to the 'mimesis...of ancestral

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp 18–19, emphasis in the original

<sup>4</sup> Eva Kit Wah Man, *Issues of Contemporary Art and Aesthetics in Chinese Context*, Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, p 96

designs as a form of sympathetic magic'<sup>5</sup> in the work of Australian Aboriginal artists, the postmodern frames for appropriation nonetheless came to define the practice in Western art discourse.

This is primarily due to the writings of a small group of New York-based critics publishing on the topic in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the pages of the journal *October*, writing prompted by a small group exhibition in New York's Artists Space titled 'Pictures', curated by *October* editor Douglas Crimp. Crimp and the *October* writers traced appropriation's precursors not to its variety of ancient manifestations but to European traditions ranging from Renaissance painting to Dada collage to the French Surrealists to, ultimately, the rise of photography. While Crimp and his peers wrote eloquently on the role of appropriation in a number of works in the 'Pictures' exhibition, their foundational essays on appropriation tended to focus on the operation of images in the works. As I have discussed elsewhere<sup>6</sup>, this focus on imagery as the primary element of appropriation was ironic because, while these writers used literary theory (semiotics, deconstruction) to make sense of how the art operated, their writing tending to ignore any text present in the artworks they were discussing. As a result, invoking the term 'appropriation' today still calls forth Richard Prince's Marlboro men instead of his joke paintings, and Jack Goldstein's barking dog instead of his boldly labeled records displayed on the wall.

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<sup>5</sup> Ian McLean, 'Post-Western Poetics: Postmodern Appropriation Art in Australia', *Art History*, vol 37, no 4, 2014, p 630

<sup>6</sup> Liz Linden, 'Reframing Pictures: Reading the Art of Appropriation', *Art Journal*, vol 75, no 4, 2016, pp 40-57

This persistent emphasis on Western art-historical precedents and image-based appropriation does a disservice to the diversity of contemporary artists working with appropriation today, artists for whom appropriation is not purely a postmodern, or image-based, operation, nor is it originating from a singular source: not New York, or China, or Australia. Indeed Tiravanija's appropriations are a product of their time, with its globalised economy and its multiplicity of places. In Tiravanija's work with text, his longstanding engagement with appropriation is made plain, not only because found language has for so long served as a cornerstone of his practice, but also because the way he uses appropriated language underscores broader political operations of his work that are often concealed in the rhetoric of relationality.

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In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud specifically identified the interactivity of Tiravanija's practice as exemplary of contemporary art practices in which '...the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist'<sup>7</sup>. For Bourriaud, this pragmatism is what is radical about these artworks because, in any context, 'The relationship between people, as symbolised by goods or replaced by them, and signposted by logos, has to take on extreme and clandestine forms, if it is to

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<sup>7</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, op cit, p 13

dodge the empire of predictability,'<sup>8</sup> and, for Bourriaud, relational work such as Tiravanija's produces these 'hands-on utopias'<sup>9</sup> in which free relations may be possible.

Bourriaud's claims for Tiravanija's work became so overdetermining that the vast majority of writing on his work (this included) either mentions Bourriaud and the term 'relational aesthetics' explicitly<sup>10</sup> or describes the work using Bourriaud-favored short-hands such as 'utopian'<sup>11</sup>, 'companionable'<sup>12</sup>, 'hospitable'<sup>13</sup> or 'generous'<sup>14</sup>. Relational aesthetics was further established as *the* theoretical frame for Tiravanija's work when,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 9

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p 9

<sup>10</sup> See, as just a few among a great many examples: Andrew Berardini, 'Everything is Tiravanija's, But It's Also Yours', *X-TRA*, vol 9, no 3, 2007, <http://x-traonline.org/article/everything-is-tiravanijas-but-its-also-yours/> (accessed on 18 July 2016); Gregory Galligan, 'Follow the Screenplay', *ArtAsiaPacific* 63, 2009, p 75; Pamela M. Lee, *New Games: Postmodernism After Contemporary Art*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012, p 35.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Welch, 'Review: Fear Eats the Soul', *Ceramics: Art and Perception* 89, 2012, p 99; Janet Kraynak, 'The Land and the Economics of Sustainability', *Art Journal*, vol 69, no 4, 2010, p 17

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Downey, 'Towards a Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics', *Third Text* 86, vol 21, no 3, 2007, p 271

<sup>13</sup> Faye Hirsch, 'PASSPORT, PLEASE', *Art in America*, vol 99, no 6, 2011, p 79

<sup>14</sup> Joshua Decter, 'Review: Rirkrit Tiravanija, Gavin Brown's Enterprise', *Artforum*, vol 49, no 9, 2011, p 282; Janet Kraynak, 'Tiravanija's Liability', *Documents* 13, 1998, p 29

two years after Bourriaud's text was translated in English, Claire Bishop published her own influential essay on the topic, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', in the pages of *October*.

Bishop's text functions both as a criticism of Bourriaud's book and a secondhand critique of the work Bourriaud describes, since she is essentially taking issue with those works *as characterised by* Bourriaud. Liam Gillick, the only artist other than Tiravanija on which Bishop focuses her critique, famously rebuked Bishop (and *October*) for this armchair criticism, writing that in her essay 'a set of artists has been shoehorned into a battle about intellectual territory that merely compounds the problems inherent in *Relational Aesthetics*'<sup>15</sup>, and that Bishop further arms these artists for this metaphorical battle with words and concepts that are not their own. Gillick explains, 'Bishop extensively quotes museum guides, pamphlets, and mainstream art criticism in relation to Tiravanija and me, as if these reflect our ideas and ideology'<sup>16</sup>. Ironically the highly public inter-critic tussle over accuracy and relevance between Bourriaud and Bishop, and later Bishop and Gillick, only further confirmed relational aesthetics as *the* lens through which art around the turn of the millennium would be viewed.

While the tale of critical infighting surrounding relational aesthetics may seem tangential to my primary focus on Tiravanija's use of appropriated text, it is important to consider because Bishop's essay and these critical revisions contain useful insights into the political stakes of relational work and how community is constituted within it. Bishop points out that Bourriaud framed these interactive practices as

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<sup>15</sup> Liam Gillick and Claire Bishop, 'Letters and Responses', *October* 115, 2006, p 97

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p 98



superior to optical contemplation of an object, which is assumed to be passive and disengaged, because the work of art is a 'social form' capable of producing positive human relationships. As a consequence, the work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect.<sup>17</sup>

Holding these relational works up to this standard, Bishop identifies a number of flaws in Bourriaud's argument, questioning for example his focus on the interactive structure of the work as its source of meaning, rather than the content contained within it, pointing out that '*what* Tiravanija cooks, *how* and *for whom*, are less important to Bourriaud than the fact he gives away the results of his cooking for free'<sup>18</sup>. This question of *who* gets to participate in the 'micro-communities'<sup>19</sup> so celebrated by Bourriaud is at the heart of Bishop's critique for whom 'relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience'<sup>20</sup> for its perceived success.

But as much as Bishop's essay was critical of what she perceived as Tiravanija's work's reliance on 'an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness'<sup>21</sup> in order for his work to function, Tiravanija's work is precisely *about* divided subjectivities. On this, Tiravanija is explicit: recalling his childhood in Thailand attending an American Catholic school he recalls thinking 'I am growing up in this

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<sup>17</sup> Claire Bishop 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110, 2004, p 62

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p 64, emphasis in the original

<sup>19</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, op cit, p 58

<sup>20</sup> Bishop, 'Antagonism', op cit, p 54

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p 67

contemporary modern structure to be fragmented, influenced, and subconsciously colonised' and says that as an artist he has dedicated his practice to addressing this fragmented subjectivity, explaining, 'all the things I have been doing are about getting myself back'<sup>22</sup>.

Thus while many, like Bishop, see Tiravanija's work as lacking political 'friction'<sup>23</sup>, others identify the perceived amiability of his installations as a Trojan horse, disguising the more critical operations inside. Tiravanija's longtime dealer, Gavin Brown, characterises Tiravanija's practice by its 'melancholia', explaining:

Rirkrit's story seems well known: Shit-eating grin and a friend to all. His name and practice have become so naturally ubiquitous that one doesn't even question what occupied the historical space before him. It's so familiar and comfortable. Rice & curry—feels good in the tummy. But is that really the story here? Of course there is still a heartening thrill in eating a meal in a gallery. One has that elusive real moment. But in the end I always leave Rirkrit's work feeling depressed. Where was the hope and feeling of community?<sup>24</sup>

Brown's discomfort with the "'friendship" culture'<sup>25</sup> so many critics link to Tiravanija's practice belies the authoritarian aspect of Tiravanija's constructed situations, in which the

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<sup>22</sup> Brainard Carey and Delia Bajo, 'Art In Conversation: Rirkrit Tiravanija', *Brooklyn Rail*, February 2004, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2004/02/art/rirkrit-tiravanija> (accessed on 15 July 2016)

<sup>23</sup> Bishop, 'Antagonism', op cit, p 67

<sup>24</sup> Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Supermarket*, DAP, New York, p 72

<sup>25</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, op cit, p 32

viewer is, by definition, in the artist's control. Brown reminds us that 'in the end we are within his structure, his world—a frame generally made from the cheapest plywood'<sup>26</sup>. In short, the 'equality'<sup>27</sup> identified by some as valorised in relational work ignores the circumscribing hierarchy and artifice around it.

For example Tiravanija's *untitled (shall we dance?)* from 1993 consisted of a room in New York's 303 Gallery installed with a record player, a single record (the soundtrack from *The King and I*) and the artist himself. When visitors entered the room, Tiravanija would play the song 'Shall We Dance?' and invite them to join him in a waltz, immediately implicating them in the absurdly revisionist historical romance between Gertrude Lawrence as 'an English school teacher' and Yul Brenner in blackface as 'the "uncivilized" Siamese King'<sup>28</sup>. Further his now-iconic *untitled (pad thai)* (1990), in which the artist cooked and gave away a pad thai meal to visitors on the opening night of his exhibition at the Paula Allen Gallery, was not only assumed to be catering by many of the gallery's visitors, but points to ongoing misunderstandings and biases triggered by his works with giveaway food. One art dealer who visited a Tiravanija installation, for example, embeds his after-the-fact critique of the 'disingenuousness' of the community in Tiravanija's works with a telling misrepresentation, recalling, 'The only people that came in [to Tiravanija's exhibition] were people trying to get a free lunch, like unpaid critics

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<sup>26</sup> Tiravanija, *Supermarket*, op cit, p 72

<sup>27</sup> Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster quoted in Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, op cit, p 13

<sup>28</sup> Record sleeve text by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Film Corporation from Rodgers and Hammerstein, *The King and I*, E.M.I. Limited, Australia, 1956

who would go in twenty-five times to get spring rolls'<sup>29</sup>. That Tiravanija has never served spring rolls in his work exposes, among other things, the speaker's disengagement from the cultural specificity of the elements in that artwork and also echoes Bishop's critique of Bourriaud's own lack of critical interest in *what* Tiravanija cooks.

Raimar Stange calls these cultural elisions and oversights between Thailand and the West 'the real questions'<sup>30</sup> explored in Tiravanija's work, questions that, for Tiravanija, manifest most explicitly in text. Tiravanija has explained that, from the outset of his practice, 'it was all about language and identity'<sup>31</sup>, and indeed his engagement with text was evident early on from texts etched in glass (on the face of an empty vitrine, on eyeglasses) to a collaborative dual-language magazine (*Ver*) to his early postcards. Like the glasses (an edition for *Parkett* from 1995) or *Ver* (a magazine Tiravanija has published in collaboration with other Thai artists since 2000), Tiravanija's early works with text were often created as editions, made to circulate more widely than his unique works, therefore mobilising language as a way to communicate the imperatives inherent in his other projects. For example, a poster Tiravanija made in collaboration with sculptor Mark di Suvero (figure 1) was created as a complement to their collaborative *Peace*

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<sup>29</sup> Vito Acconci, Kenny Schachter and Lilian Pfaff, *Art Becomes Architecture Becomes Art: A Conversation Between Vito Acconci and Kenny Schachter*, SpringerWien, New York, 2006, p 69

<sup>30</sup> Raimar Stange, 'Interview: Rirkrit Tiravanija', *Spike Art Quarterly* 31, Vienna, 2012, <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/interview-rirkrit-tiravanija> (accessed on 20 December 2015)

<sup>31</sup> Carey and Bajo, 'Art in Conversation', op cit

*Tower* (2006) project in that year's Whitney Biennial. The poster was distributed as a fold out component of the biennial's catalog and presents a front page of *The Los Angeles Free Press* newspaper from 1966, which describes preparations for the original Peace Tower, a massive public artwork originally created by di Suvero and other artists in Los Angeles to protest the war in Vietnam. Over this found newspaper describing the original artwork that he and di Suvero have recreated, Tiravanija has stenciled the text 'COME TOGETHER', in white letters that disappear into the color of the newsprint.

The appropriated phrase, 'COME TOGETHER', brings with it a long chain of references. John Tain explains:

...the textual intervention is identifiable as Tiravanija's from both the layout and the slogan form, similar to that of other pieces.... And yet, of course, we would also recognize the words not as Tiravanija's at all, but taken from John Lennon's lyrics for the Beatles song of the same name (which itself was inspired in turn by Timothy Leary's 1969 gubernatorial campaign against Ronald Reagan).<sup>32</sup>

One consequence of the phrase's familiarity is that it appears simple, a platitude from the past reappearing in the present. But the historical specificity of these 60s era pop cultural references (the original peace tower in Watts, John Lennon, Californian culture-clash politics) introduced into the milieu of post 9/11 New York City (the city marked as a site, and justification, for violence—including as the site of Lennon's assassination) resonate with a complex warning.

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<sup>32</sup> John Tain, 'Peace Tower as Commonplace: Relational Aesthetics' *Lieux de mémoire*,

Often making multiple paintings of the same slogan, presented against a background of contemporary newspaper spreads, Tiravanija is able to amplify these resonances over time, recontextualising the recurring appropriated texts into new political dialogues depending on the backing newspaper. For example, his painting *untitled (the days of this society is numbered/September 21, 2009)* (2009) presents spreads from the September 21<sup>st</sup> 2009 edition of *The New York Times*, painted over with an orange text written in the same uppercase Helvetica typeface he tends to use in many of his other text-based works (figure 2). In this case, the painted text is a clumsy translation of a quote from Guy Debord, leader of the Situationist International and author of *Society of the Spectacle*. The dual appropriation of the warning of the French post-war political theorist with the contemporary American newspaper headlines combines to create an atmosphere of post-globalised dread. The chaotic background is dominated visually by the colorful presence of advertisements for airlines, men's department stores and expensive jewelry cheering consumption in the wake of the global financial crisis, while the more sober tones of the editorial content recede into the background. Against this, Debord's quote reads as an explicit damnation of our unquestioning, passive acceptance of consumer culture, made all the more urgent for its massive orange presence; as tall as a person, the canvas overwhelms the viewer.

By contrast another variant of the work, *untitled (the days of this society is numbered/December 7, 2012)* (2014), pairs the same text appropriated from Debord painted over a Thai paper from 2012 detailing the Thai king's illness (figure 3). While the overall effect of this work to earlier (and subsequent) versions is obviously related (newspaper backgrounds, same painted phrase, same 'default' typeface), the overall

signification of the work is changed through the implication of Thai national politics, the significantly more blue hue to the overall color of the newspaper background, the translucent black (opposed to solid orange) paint, and the changed line breaks of the phrase itself. While the earlier version reads, 'THE/ DAYS/ OF/ THIS/ SOCIETY/ IS/ NUMBERERED', the later one reads, 'THE/ DAYS/ OF/ THIS/ SOCIETY/ IS NUMBERERED', letting 'is' and 'numbered' settle together at the bottom of the canvas where the fatalistic verdict stands alone. In the context of the ongoing, iterative nature of this work, with the same phrase reproduced over the course of many canvases and prints, the 'is numbered' portion of the phrase also becomes self-referential, alluding to the inner-workings of art editions as well as the potentiality of the luxury market itself in a moment characterised by the Occupy Wall Street movement. This art-world institutional critique further points to the multivalent signification of the phrase in the various architectures it is deployed, re-signifying not only based on the newspapers which bear it, but also in respect to the gallery or collection wall on which it hangs.

These temporal and contextual slippages are not the only mix-ups present in this work. Quentin Bajac, a French curator working at the Museum of Modern Art, which owns *untitled (the days of this society is numbered/December 7, 2012)*, explains of the Debord reference that, 'it mistranslates it, in bad international English that I and a lot of people are practicing'<sup>33</sup>. This issue of translation, specifically as it relates to globalisation and the internationalism of the art world, is one that Tiravanija repeatedly takes up,

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<sup>33</sup> Andy Battaglia, 'MoMA Takes a Fresh Look at New Art', *The Wall Street Journal*, March 16, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/moma-takes-a-fresh-look-at-new-art-1426543936> (accessed on July 15, 2016)

perhaps unsurprisingly given his own background. Born in Argentina to Thai parents (his father was a diplomat, his mother an oral surgeon), Tiravanija was schooled in Thailand, Ethiopia, the US and Canada. He remains peripatetic and polyglot, traveling and moving between homes frequently, with studios in Bangkok, New York and Berlin. He has referred to his international upbringing as formative for his work, explaining in an interview in 2004 that, ‘all the work that I have ever made is about the position I am in the Western world, which I was trying to understand’<sup>34</sup>.

And Tiravanija’s work is as much about understanding his place in the West as it is about considering his place in Thailand. Writer Doryun Chong explains how Tiravanija’s life-size plastic sculpture of a pad thai dish, *Young Man, if my wife makes it...*, received its title (figure 4):

The title comes from an interaction [Tiravanija] once had with a senior Thai artist, who on the occasion of the younger artist’s lecture on his earlier cooking performance ‘Pad Thai,’ uttered those derisive words to question its status as art. Tiravanija recalls: ‘There were at the time questions concerning the authenticity of my Thainess, and [whether] I was using Thainess (culture) as an exotic flavour, for which [it] became in the Western context a successful work of art.’ The question—a dilemma shared by many non-Western contemporary artists—stayed with him.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Carey and Bajo, ‘Art in Conversation’, op cit

<sup>35</sup> Doryun Chong, ‘Rirkrit Tiravanija’, Walker Art Center website,

<http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artists/rirkrit->

[tiravanija?gclid=CObXyvvt8c0CFQWWvQod-CcN5g](http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artists/rirkrit-tiravanija?gclid=CObXyvvt8c0CFQWWvQod-CcN5g) (accessed on 14 July 2016)



While the appropriated text in this case appears in the title of Tiravanija's work and is therefore not visible in the form of the sculpture itself, it nonetheless sets the trap for Tiravanija's critique of identity, alluding to the status of the sculpture as a facsimile of something 'real'.

Tiravanija's work evinces further personal insights into the broader politics of translation and globalisation, both in the art world specifically and beyond, by appropriating text to bring previously unlikely cultural elisions into view. In Tiravanija's text-paintings and elsewhere, linguistic slip-ups and misfires recur with some regularity. For example, one component of his 2011 exhibition, *Fear Eats the Soul at Gavin Brown's Enterprise* in New York, was *untitled 2011 (t-shirt, no t-shirt)*, a freestanding print shop silk-screening white t-shirts with various awkwardly constructed phrases immortalising such cultural collisions (figures 5 and 6). For twenty dollars, visitors could order a shirt screenprinted with a phrase chosen from a variety of improbable options, ranging from the unlikely ('MAKE A MONKEY OUT OF CLAY') to the uncomfortable ('IRAN IRAG IKEA I AM BUSY') to the openly hostile ('WE DON'T MIX') to the outright bigoted ('ASIANS MUST EAT RICE').

Tiravanija's linguistic appropriations point to the ways in which speech is power, because the verbal tics and subconscious elisions that are expressed in spoken language expose the assumptions embedded within its constituent parts. Unlike the appropriations of the 70s and 80s with their implied critique of authorship, Tiravanija's appropriations of racist language, such as his 'ASIANS MUST EAT RICE', do not so much interrogate the origins of such language as put these words in others' mouths (and on their bodies), effectively mobilising these viewer-participants into an ironic army of post-colonial

political critique for the Anthropocene age. In other words, Tiravanija's appropriated texts operate differently than those texts appropriated in 'Pictures'-era artworks with their postmodern concerns, and Tiravanija has confirmed that 'I am not interested in authorship'<sup>36</sup>. Instead, in cases such as his reinscription of racist tropes onto the bodies of paying participants, Tiravanija appropriates not for postmodern, or reverential, or mimetic reasons, but for a literally of-the-moment one: to introduce political questions about who is speaking these words *now*.

While art theory has thus far had little to say on the operations of appropriated language in contemporary art, literary theory addresses the politics of appropriated language explicitly in contemporary writing on conceptual poetry, meaning practices that are 'a form of copying, recycling, or appropriation'<sup>37</sup>, in which 'the idea becomes a machine that makes the text'<sup>38</sup>. Such conceptual writing has been widely discussed as a 21<sup>st</sup> century avant-garde in which citational and appropriative strategies have yielded new insights into the recontextualised material by structuring it into new forms.

But increasingly such formal framings of conceptual poetry's appropriation of language have been challenged, both because these linguistic appropriations are seen as 'a racist tradition... ignoring major swaths of innovators—namely poets from past African American literary movements—whose prodigious writings... avant-gardists have

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<sup>36</sup> Stange, 'Interview', op cit

<sup>37</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry By Other Means In the New Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p 12

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, 'Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics', *Open Letter: A Canadian Journal of Writing and Theory*, vol 12, no 7, 2005, p 98

usurped without proper acknowledgement'<sup>39</sup>, thus rendering appropriation simply a 'formalist white-gaze gesture'<sup>40</sup>, and also because conceptual poetry's rejection of authorship seems predicated on 'the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like *voice* to alter conditions forged in history'<sup>41</sup>.

Poet Cathy Park Hong identifies these criticisms as emerging out of 'a new movement in American poetry, a movement galvanized by the activism of Black Lives Matter, spearheaded by writers of color'<sup>42</sup>, characterising this 'new movement' as operating in two ways, either by 'fueling a raw politics into personal lyric', or by

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<sup>39</sup> Cathy Park Hong, 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde', *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion* 7, 2014, <http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/7/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde> (accessed on 11 July 2016)

<sup>40</sup> John Keene, 'On Vanessa Place, Gone With the Wind, and the Limit Point of Certain Conceptual Aesthetics', *J's Theater*, 18 May 2015, <http://jstheater.blogspot.com.au/2015/05/on-vanessa-place-gone-with-wind-and.html> (accessed on 13 July 2016)

<sup>41</sup> Hong, 'Delusions', op cit, emphasis in the original

<sup>42</sup> Cathy Park Hong, 'There's a New Movement in American Poetry and It's Not Kenneth Goldsmith', *The New Republic*, October 2, 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/122985/new-movement-american-poetry-not-kenneth-goldsmith> (accessed on 13 July 2016)

‘redefining’ avant-garde appropriation<sup>43</sup>. Hong describes how such poets are making writing that is multivalent in its forms and its references, increasingly:

...minstrelized, digitalized, theatricalized artifice, speaking in a mélange of offshoots, with multiple entryways and exits through the soaring use of aberrant vernaculars. The form is code-switching: code-switching between languages, between Englishes, between genres, between races, between bodies.<sup>44</sup>

This is the code-switching evidenced by Tiravanija’s texts, and framed by his efforts to understand his upbringing between Thailand and elsewhere. His appropriation of language is therefore an act of reclamation, of ‘getting himself back’, exploring subjectivity by using texts that are specifically as divided and contingent as Tiravanija’s multilingualism itself. Tiravanija’s appropriated texts use such ‘code-switching’ not to critique originality and authorship, but to reanimate and then repossess. He explains that rather than wanting to explore authorship as originating from a single, monolithic voice, ‘I am interested in the possibilities that can be arrived at when people put their ideas together. There are ideas that have been released into the world of culture that I find important to quote, re-present or re-address’<sup>45</sup>.

Yet Tiravanija does not see this polyphony of voice as inherently utopian, explaining that, ironically, the very collectivity of his work so often characterised as

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<sup>43</sup> Hong, ‘New Movement’, op cit

<sup>44</sup> Hong, ‘Delusions’, op cit

<sup>45</sup> Stange, ‘Interview’, op cit

‘emancipatory’<sup>46</sup> was actually supposed to spur opposing thoughts of responsibility in the viewer:

When I started to cook and serve food... I quickly realised that viewers (readers, critics) were interpreting the work as performance in a Beuysian sense, as a staged situation, which meant that viewers had a certain distance to it. I felt that this distance represented the gap in Western thought between ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ which I needed to attack and dismantle – the ‘doubt’ about the author, or the ‘doubt’ about the subject’s position or positioning. So, in order to confuse the positions, I implicated the viewer.<sup>47</sup>

As in many of the appropriated elements of his works, the language Tiravanija represents to the viewer is not specifically his (or *anyone’s*), but *all* of ours together, for which we are *each* accountable.

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That Tiravanija is not commonly called an appropriation artist, or a text artist, exposes the critical biases both in how ‘appropriation’ was originally theorised and towards other, more of-the-moment theoretical frameworks. While he is most certainly a noteworthy creator of participatory, immaterial works, the ‘convivial’ label applied to that relational work continues to overshadow the actual imperatives of his practice. He is

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<sup>46</sup> Stewart Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', *Third Text* 87, vol 21, no 4, 2007, p 383

<sup>47</sup> Stange, ‘Interview’, op cit

increasingly exhibiting fabricated static objects (sculptures, prints, paintings, videos, drawings, etc.), as indeed he has always done, while the more interactive installations are, if not rarer, at least often complemented or outnumbered by traditional works and editions in a given exhibition. In short, his works take on many guises, and many create a political critique through appropriation.

Tiravanija's appropriations incorporate historical references beyond those texts from politics and pop culture considered above, as he also borrows widely from the worlds of film, fashion and literature, as well as architecture. Works by noted architects including Philip Johnson, Friedrich Kiesler, R. M. Schindler and others appear throughout his practice. Tain explains that, 'in reclaiming these [architectural] pieces, and "animating" the artwork as a site for the building of social relations, Tiravanija cannily transforms the act of institutional critique from something that the artist reveals into something in which the viewer participates directly'<sup>48</sup>. And this transformation of something historically iconic into something with imminent use value is equally true of his textual appropriations, which 'reclaim' certain language and make the viewer interpret or, in other words, *use* it. His text-works therefore operate as a bridge between the language's original significance and its multiplicity of present-day readings, the foundation of which is laid by the artist, and its connections made by the viewer. It is this implication of the viewer's *individual* subjectivity (her assumptions, her politics, her references) that is precisely the innovation of Tiravanija's work; the interactivity of the

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<sup>48</sup> Tain, 'Peace Tower', p 178

work makes each individual critically responsible for her own reading. While this may appear 'sociable'<sup>49</sup> to some, in the end you are simply alone in the crowd.

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<sup>49</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p 28