

Interview with Rirkrit Tiravanija

urbanTension 06

museum in progress: You realized an image for the project URBAN TENSION. Please tell us about the ideas that lead to the piece?

Rirkrit Tiravanija: It is an image of a woman carrying a shopping bag with the word DEMONSTRATION. I have been working in the past several years with the idea of demonstration as a gathering of ideas a site for accumulation. For me, demonstration can be read in two ways: firstly as an act or an activity of expression that cumulates in a large number of people who together support an idea that needs to be expressed; or secondly, one could (singularly) make an act by which another can take up the ideas and pass them on, e.g. a demonstration of how to open a can.

mip: Can you tell us about the relationship of your work and the experience of tension in urban space?

RT: We are living in a highly mediated world where all our senses are bombarded with "points of sale"; I feel that we exist, particularly in the occidental capitalist conditions, under the influence of conspicuous consumption. We have to DEMONSTRATE for more possibilities for alternative tensions.

mip: What kind of effects do you expect, what sort of reception by the viewer/reader/passers-by?

RT: A small change!

mip: Have the visual arts become an "involuntary discipline" (car B. Vanderlinden/B. Sterling)? Is it therefore that the visual arts are tending to give up their own cultural space, often referring to or mixing up with other disciplines such as architecture and urbanism? Do those disciplines offer more "production value"? Is it a matter of going "where the action is"? Or is there more?

RT: We are dealing with a contemporary condition by which all information and experiences are being conditioned and mediated by the economies of consumption. The mind's eye is set to experience all it can eat. And in that condition, the visual arts will find it necessary to battle for the control of the image (visual and/or invisible). The field of this battle does not lay, any longer, just in the institutions of visual culture, but rather on the sidewalk and in the shopping mall or along the freeway. Go where the money is!

mip: It seems that after giving up religion, aristocracy, craftsmanship, the visual arts are now giving up the museum (as an institution and as a concept of art) and other specialized spaces for art as well. Will we find ourselves soon again in a kind of Lascaux or Altamira situation, a situation in which the making of art is simply a way of confronting reality, artists spreading throughout networks in many different ways personalized cultural messages?

RT: That is very optimistic, the idea that art could give up economy, which perpetuates its existence! I think it possible to confront reality, but it's a slow revolution (meaning the turning

of the wheel). But as much as a larger part of the art shares still maintain their foothold in the institutions of art, then yes, there will be other possibilities. And we need now, more than ever, to confront the reality.

mip: museum in progress is a network, which wants to popularise the arts similar to the agit-prop movements of the avant-gardes. Today however it is important to make a firm distinction between "popular"/"popularity" and "populist"/"populism". How would you define "populism"?

RT: A lot of people!

mip: How important is it for an artist in our days to act politically and what can be achieved in this context?

RT: Perhaps I would rather think of it more in social terms. In general I think most artists are acting (to make art) on personal and political grounds. If it would be possible to make situations to confront reality in daily life, and shift a small lint of consciousness, I would think that is important.

mip: Today artists act as sociologists and social workers, as barkeeper and journalists, as photo reporters - how would you define the role of an artist in this context?

RT: We are working in the reality of human existence!

mip: Which role-plays the audience confronted with art, which extends into everyday life?

RT: They (the audience, the public, the people) make the everyday possible.

mip: The question of identity was and still is one of the most important tasks of modern and post-modern art. How is this question placed in social circumstances, which become established in-between the push of globalisation, networking and global structures?

RT: We are what we eat!