



Rirkrit Tiravanija

MARY JANE JACOB CAN WE BEGIN
BY INTRODUCING YOUR IN THAILAND—
THE LAND?

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA It began in 1998 when Kamin Lertchaiprasert, another Thai artist, and I bought some land near the village of Sanpatong, about twenty minutes from Chiang Mai. We saw this place as an open space to cultivate ideas of social engagement. And we wanted other artists to join us.

In the middle of the land are two working rice fields; this area had been a rice field. Now the harvests are shared by the participants and some families in the local village afflicted by AIDS. Surrounding the fields, artists are developing different structures for living that reference meditation huts in Buddhist monasteries. I have made one formed around three spheres of need: the base floor is a communal space with a fireplace for gathering and exchange; the second floor for reading, meditation, and reflection; and the top floor for sleep.

The land is also without electricity or water, so this project has offered an opportunity for experimentation with natural renewable resources as sources for electric and gas. The artist group Superflex from Copenhagen has been developing their idea of the Supergas, a biogas system. The Dutch collaborative Atelier Van Lieshout has been engaged in developing the toilet system, which would be linked to the production of biogas. Arthur Meyer, an artist from Chicago, has been interested to develop a system for solar power. The Thai artist Prachya Phintong is working with fish farming. So it goes on...without end.

DO THESE PROJECTS END UP COMING FROM ARTISTS BECAUSE IT IS ARTISTS WHO ARE WILLING TO WORK UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES OR BECAUSE YOUR CONTACTS ARE IN THE ART WORLD?

Art's really our sphere, but Superflex came to Thailand because a Thai engineering

company was looking into certain kinds of biogas structures as inexpensive and low-maintenance energy sources. So they were invited to come and survey pig farms and, in the meantime, they used the land as a testing ground.

DO YOU THINK THAT ARTISTS ARE PLAYING A PARTICULAR ROLE IN FINDING NEW SOLUTIONS, A NEW WAY OF LIVING?

No, I don't think it's just artists though, of course, they certainly are. I'm also quite interested in finding people in other fields who think in very open, creative ways to deal with life. I'm interested in working with these ideas as demonstrations: people demonstrating what they're doing.

YOUR WORK HAS BEEN VERY MUCH APPRECIATED, SEEN IN MANY MAJOR MUSEUMS AND BIENNIALS FROM ALMOST THE MOMENT YOU GRADUATED FROM THE SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO. BUT DISCUSSIONS OF YOUR ART ARE OFTEN RESTRICTED TO THE DISCOURSES OF POST-



MODERNISM AND MODERNISM. CAN WE EXPAND HERE TO TALK ABOUT THE PLACE OF BUDDHISM IN YOUR CONCEPT OF ART? THROUGH THE AWAKE PROGRAM, WE HAVE BECOME AWARE THAT EVEN DUCHAMP HAS NOT BEEN FULLY UNDERSTOOD; HIS WORK HAS BEEN PERCEIVED AS ROOTED IN THE ARTIST'S AGENCY WITHOUT REGARD FOR THAT OF THE AUDIENCE, THOUGH DUCHAMP BELIEVED THE VIEWER PLAYED AN ESSENTIAL ROLE. AND, SO, WE MIGHT ALSO TALK ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS THROUGH ART. I CAN ASK INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS OR WE CAN BEGIN BY TALKING ABOUT WHAT'S COMING INTO YOUR MIND.

I've been keeping it blank. I think it's interesting that there is a great curiosity about Buddhism now. I mean, I was always trying to explain certain things, but not really being able to, and then just putting the word "Buddhism" to it. At some point I was just having to use that word and, of course, when I would say it, people saw a completely different image from what I was actually trying to show, because I'm talking about a kind of practice. And my idea of practice is probably not even the same as another person's idea of practice, or what practice means in terms of the idea of Buddhism.

DOES YOUR OWN BUDDHIST PRACTICE OR TRAINING ORIGINATE IN YOUR FAMILY UPBRINGING?

My practice is more or less a daily structure, and it is not at all ritualistic. In that sense, I'm more a minimalist. A lot of practice within Thai culture is ritualistic, but I tend to try and pare it down more to a daily-life condition.

IS THE LAND A BUDDHIST PRACTICE FOR YOU?

The land is quite interesting because there are two of us who started it and we each approach it very differently. Kamin sees it as a very physical thing, as a place for certain kinds of meditation and certain practices that could happen within the Buddhist field. I see it partly like that, but also within a much more open structure. I see it as being much more fluid. It's not so much a discussion as a kind of action... more about a relational structure that emanates from Buddhist concepts—at least for the people who pass through there, who have dealt with things there, and who have been working on projects there. They can feel that. It is not just from Kamin and me, but also from people around.

SO YOU SEE BUDDHISM AND ART MORE IN A TEMPORARY, EPHEMERAL, OR LIVING WAY?

Yes, I see it as a changing thing. Whereas, in a sense, Kamin sees it as a form which you can follow. But he's trying to reach a point where there isn't any form...where you just can be...you're just there. It's quite interesting.

AND DOES THAT MEAN THAT YOU AND KAMIN WILL BOTH ARRIVE AT THE SAME POINT SOMEDAY?

Yes, we should! Probably not at the same time but at the same point. So, in that sense, I can see myself as being the one who says "yes" to everything and makes no decisions. Whereas Kamin would be much more reluctant to open it up, because he doesn't know how it would go, how it would work out. And that's interesting to me in terms of just how we negotiate it. But my negotiation is actually to not negotiate at all. So it would be the kind of conversation where I wouldn't have to say anything, but Kamin would still know what I was thinking about it.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR OPENNESS IS ABOUT TRUST, ALLOWING A WORK TO CONNECT TO PEOPLE IN THEIR OWN WAY, SUSPENDING JUDGMENT?

I think the idea of judgment is interesting in relation to Buddhist practice. I always get asked, "What are your expectations?" And I say, "I don't have any," because I don't predetermine things. And, "Do you feel it's successful or not?" and I say, "I don't measure things that way, in terms of good or bad, or success." It changes how you look at what happens. And I think that is quite important in terms of living in a Buddhist way: not to have preconceived structures or to close off possibilities; but it's not even about being open or closed; it's just about being blank. In a way, of course, you can receive more if you are empty.

DO YOU THINK YOU WERE TRYING TO MAKE AN OPEN, "EMPTY" SPACE IN MUSEUMS?

Yes, I definitely think so. And I think part of what I was trying to do there was to open the museum...and strangely...now I feel like, well, you have to reopen the museum again—in the sense of making it able to receive. Museums looked much more open thirty years ago in terms of what they could cope with as an experience within their structure. Now the experience is restricted by fire regulations and fear of lawsuits. I was just in L.A. speaking with a friend who's having a show in a museum there, and she's having a really difficult time installing the work. Of course, there are important structural things that museums have to cope with in order to function, but there is so much fear in museums in terms of what art is really trying to do, that it's difficult to make a real experience.

WHAT DO YOU THINK MUSEUMS CAN OFFER AS PLACES FOR EXPERIENCE, AND WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY OF WHAT WE NEED THEM TO DO?

For me, now, I think of Western museums as vaults for contemplation and education because they're so restricted. I see established museums as having such a great burden. I don't know...they come into some kind of structure with the law, which then affects the economy. This happens even in contemporary museums that are very much geared to what is current artistic practice. From my own experience, there is such a great deal of negotiation that at some point you feel so compromised. So I think the museums should just be a place for study, then let the experimentation be made somewhere else where it's able to happen under conditions suited to the viewer.

SO WHY DO YOU CONTINUE TO WORK IN MUSEUMS—OR IS THAT WHY YOU ARE WORKING ON THE LAND?

I think the land is about finding a structure outside the structure, but I think the land is...well...Thailand is, in a way, a place where you can have certain experiences. I mean, it's much more open to what we would like to do, partly because it's relatively unorganized and un-institutionalized. Yet Thailand has certain platforms for dealing with actual living conditions rather than artistic production. In a way, everything that's going on at the land is much more a part of daily life—it's not making sculpture, it's making cooking gas. Nonetheless, it's done through certain kinds of filters which are coming through artistic practice.

In Thailand, for the longest time I didn't feel the need to actually have an exhibition or make any work in that way, but rather to do something else. Partly it was because there wasn't really a frame. But now they're starting to make all these museum spaces there, and of course, it is not really understood and the question is always: "What is the museum?"

MAYBE THAI CULTURE WAS ALREADY EVOLVED AND NOW WE'RE ASKING THEM TO DEVOLVE?

Yes! It's already past that point and now they're going back! So, it's interesting that there are these new museum spaces, and for me to actually go back in and use them, to set them off again. There was a request from a new museum in Chiang Mai for me to make an exhibition of past works because people haven't seen them. Before I would have thought that was a strange idea or not necessary, but now I think it

would be interesting to do that. They call it “the retrospective,” but I’ve decided that it will be a two-person retrospective which Kamin and I will work on together. The group running the museum questions a great deal, so it will be interesting to work with them in that context. And this particular group of people has also managed to establish the museum as a community center. They’ve kind of layered so many different things into it that the community uses it in a very different way than what we would think of as a museum. There are occasionally paintings and sculpture in the space, but at the same time it’s actually a space that the community is using. There people don’t really have a preconceived notion of what the museum is and, therefore, what art would be. And so, it’s quite a lively dialogue at all levels. In Thailand, we use temples and shopping malls. The



the land, 1998 ongoing

museum is somewhere in between those two spaces. It’s not seen as a contemplative, religious experience, but also not a shopping experience...it’s something in between.

SO IN WORKING BOTH IN MUSEUMS AND LIVING SITUATIONS DO YOU LEAVE ASIDE THE NOMENCLATURE OF “ART”? DO YOU MAKE AN “ART OF LIVING” (A PHRASE THAT’S BEEN USED TO DESCRIBE YOUR WORK) OR DO YOU “LIVE LIFE AS A WORK OF ART” (AN IDEA WE HAVE DISCUSSED IN AWAKE)?

I don’t know, it’s a strange thing, but I suppose, for me, art is a kind of space to be used. It’s a very open space. It is not like I would rather make it art or life...it’s a lot less clear than that.

NOT A DICHOTOMY.

Yes, but on the other hand, I think it is important to bring both art and life together. And I suppose, in that sense, that is—for me—a certain kind of Buddhist practice: to bring art and life together is to arrive at that place where one recognizes that they are shared. I mean, living a life could be an artistic practice—it is a creative one and one that is in search of a balance or an openness.



WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR WORK AND LIFE ARE SEAMLESS, A CONTINUUM WITHOUT EDGES MARKED BY PROJECTS UNDERTAKEN?

Or edges don’t even exist to have a seam. In my own practice, I actually make very little. We’re communicating more than we are making anything. It’s interesting to realize that I’m not actually making very much, but instead there is a lot of thought in terms of what will happen, a projection forward. Partly I think in this way because I am in a certain system, a certain structure—the art world. But the ultimate aim would just be to be on the field, on the land.

STILL YOU CAN’T LET GO OF THE ART-WORLD FRAME?

No, you can. It’s like flying a kite. You can let it go, but there is a reeling out of a line which has not yet come to the end. At the same time, you know there is an end and there is a point where you let it go.

BUT YOU DO NOT LET IT GO YET BECAUSE YOU’RE NOT AT THE END, YOU ARE STILL DEMONSTRATING... DEMONSTRATING A WAY?

Yes, I think at some point the kite will stay in the wind. It can sustain itself and then you don’t need to hold onto it anymore.

DO YOU THINK THAT’S WHAT DUCHAMP WAS DOING WHEN HE WAS PLAYING CHESS?

I think he was still holding on to the string. I think he was just trying to let you know he was holding the string. I would say the chess was just to show you that there was the kite flying—the thing floating that should be looked at.



EARLIER YOU TALKED ABOUT HOW YOU'RE TRYING TO CREATE EXPERIENCES FOR PEOPLE. WE MIGHT CONNECT THAT TO YOUR OWN PRACTICE OF ART AS ONE OF COMMUNICATING: IN COMMUNICATING YOU MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR PEOPLE TO HAVE EXPERIENCES. BUT WHY DO WE NEED TO INVENT EXPERIENCES FOR PEOPLE? ISN'T THERE STUFF HAPPENING ALREADY...ALL THE TIME?

I don't know whether it's to make experiences or to perhaps...it's not even to rethink the experience but...it's about that question of judgment: to be able to have experience and to be able to receive more in the world. Even if you have your own experiences... well, I suppose we have our own limitations that are culturally constructed...how is it possible to surpass them and be able to experience, let's say, the idea of "otherness" without certain limitations and judgments?

I'M WONDERING ABOUT THE FLUID NATURE OF YOUR PRACTICE AND IF THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF NON-ATTACHMENT ENABLES YOU TO FOLLOW THE PATH YOU HAVE CHOSEN FOR YOUR ART AND LIFE?

I would think so and I hope so. Of course, when I'm trying to explain the idea of the work, or how one looks at it or thinks about continuing it, I've always had to talk about how it's not about the object, it's not about the image, it's perhaps much more about the use and what happens around the usage of it. But I think, slowly, I've come to some point...it's a strange thing...to the point where you actually have to make an object in order for people to understand about that idea of it being, in a way, not the main point.

BECAUSE THEY NEED THE KITE.

It's actually quite interesting because there are some things that I'm thinking about in the future, which are about a kind of action but they're actually through objects. And it's interesting at this point to start to think about the idea of the image, particularly the idea of the Buddha as an image, or whether there is an image or what is it that is the Buddha as an image. And naturally that's interesting as a Buddhist, or as an artist, or a person making work in that realm, because maybe you do kind of end up at some point making an image of Buddha, which is not really an image. There are a lot of Thai artists always making images of the Buddha, but they become more object rather than less. Kamin has been making Buddhas from destroyed money, shredded bank notes, and these Buddhas have a very strange effect in a way that I think is interesting.



CAN YOU ARTICULATE AN EXAMPLE OF SUCH AN OBJECT, SOMETHING YOU ARE CONTEMPLATING MAKING, THAT IS, AT THE SAME TIME, LESS ABOUT BEING AN OBJECT?

Something more liquid, or something that you can't...I mean, when you think about the Buddha you think of an image, but you don't really have a fixed image, which I think is very interesting. It's not...well, when you say "Christ on the Cross," you have a certain representation. But when you say, "The Buddha," you kind of have a shape, and maybe a smile or something, but you don't have a person. So, I'm quite interested in how that works.

ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO TALK ABOUT?
No...I think it was nice to talk about the kite.
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