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Rirkrit TIRAVANIJA: Ne Travaillez Jamais

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Just before New York-based artist Rirkrit Tiravanija takes a hiatus from the art world, he has to have one last show in a gallery - one that rejects the gallery. A brick wall seals off the doorway that can better be seen as a jarring refusal of specta­torship that first confines, shocks and dismisses before shly inviting the curious to wallow in it's meaning more.

Sure, blocking off the doorway to an art gallery with bricks is no new idea. Tiravanija is not the first, and probably won't be the last to do this. His Ne Travaillez Jamais (which means "never work") calls to mind Robert Barry's Closed Gallery from 1969, where he locked the gallery and handed out copies of an ardent manifesto while stomping around the neighborhood. Or maybe Santiago Sierra's 2003 blocked entranceway to the Spanish pavilion of the Venice Biennale with cinder blocks. In all cases here, there is an outright rejection of the gallery which then, at its lack of lush and prosaic gain, becomes the sculpture.

So why would Tiravanija want to reject the gallery? It's especially strange since his past work used lofty and gregarious atmospheres as the basis for his exhibitions. Take Untitled 1999 (Tomorrow can shut up and go away), for example, which was an installation open 24-hour a day at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York City that moved his whole apartment - refrigerator, TV and shower—into the gallery for almost five months. In referring to Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics in another piece as well, Tiravanija cooked Thai curry for his audience in Untitled 1992 (Free) at 303 Gallery. Here we see he uses the audience as a tool in the work itself, if not as the product, as the process.

As more than just an institutional critique, Ne Travaillez Jamais holds a fixed stare awaiting a conclusion. And that's because, his whole time, Tiravanija has kept a piece within the cavernous gallery space, having us know something else is in there—but us not knowing what. (Not to worry, there will be a wall-smashing ceremony for the closing in September, and just like a pilhata, we will see what kind of candy is inside). Though there could very well be nothing inside, Tiravanija has managed to grasp the intangible, and plant it in our minds if only for a moment. With its ping-pong play between presence and absence, Tiravanija has cooked up a piece that dimly mirrors an equally perplexing quote by Jacques Lacan: "Love is giving something you don't have to someone who doesn't exist."¹

¹ Rirkrit Tiravanija: Ne Travaillez Jamais
Ontario College of Art and Design's Professional Gallery, Toronto April 5 to September 7, 2007

Nadja SAYEJ writes mostly for The Globe and Mail in Toronto.

NOTE