

GLADSTONE

Toby Kamps, "Rirkrit Tiravanija: DAS GLÜCK IST NICHT IMMER LUSTIG (Happiness is not always fun)," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 1, 2024

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Rirkrit Tiravanija: *DAS GLÜCK IST NICHT IMMER LUSTIG* (Happiness is not always fun)



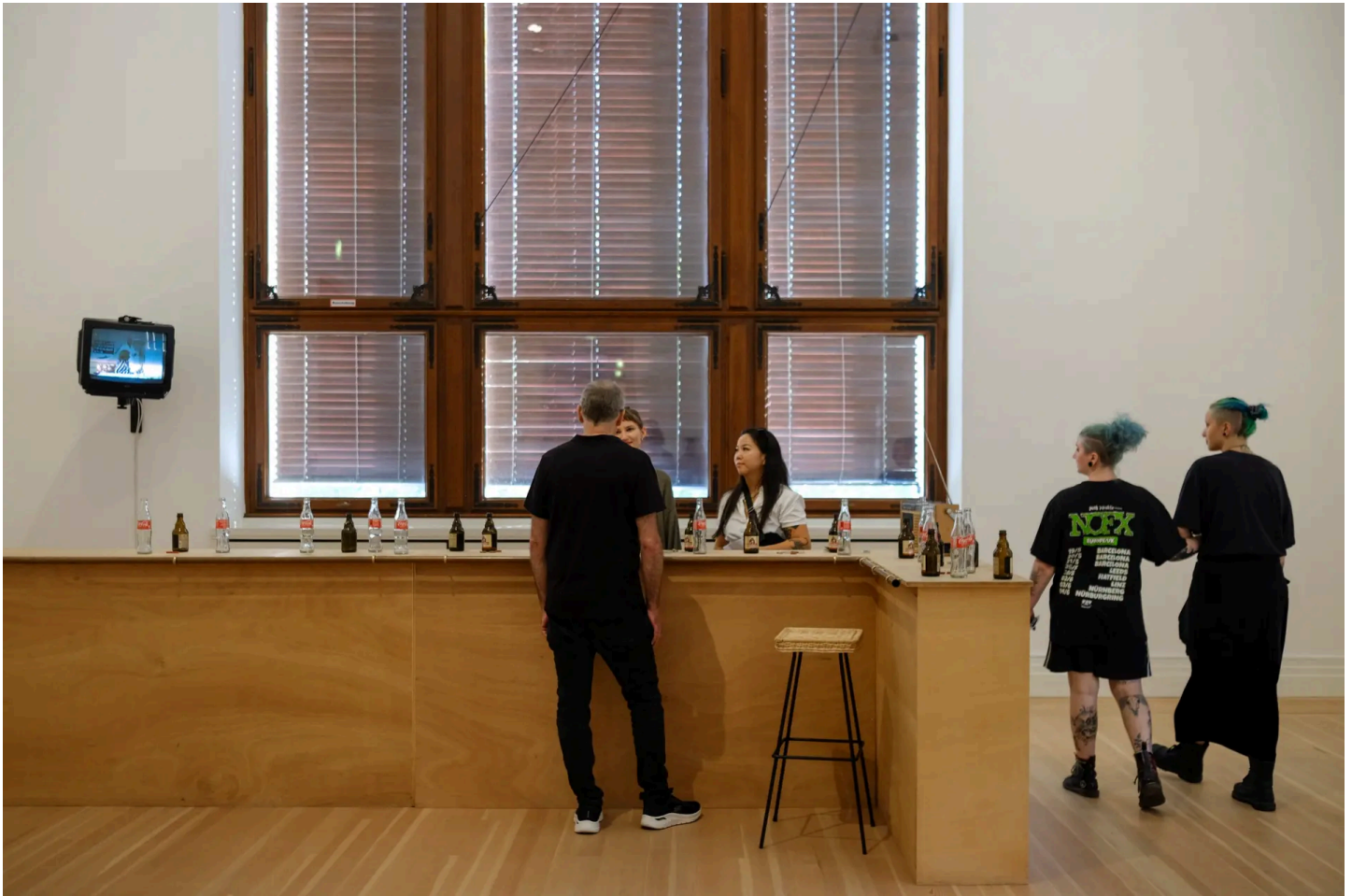
Rirkrit Tiravanija, *untitled* 2024 (demo station no. 8), 2024. Installation view: *Rirkrit Tiravanija: DAS GLÜCK IST NICHT IMMER LUSTIG*, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2024. © Gropius Bau. Photo: Guannan Li.

Rirkrit Tiravanija's survey of work from 1987 to 2024, *DAS GLÜCK IST NICHT IMMER LUSTIG* (*Happiness is not always fun*) at Gropius Bau, puts its audience at center stage. As you would expect from the leading light of relational aesthetics, the exhibition, focused largely on the Thai artist's longstanding engagement with Germany, makes the everyday dynamics of community and culture its subject matter.

DAS GLÜCK IST
NICHT IMMER
LUSTIG
(*Happiness is not
always fun*)
Gropius Bau
September 12,
2024–January
12, 2025
Berlin

The artist's best-known work *untitled 1990 (pad thai)* in which he cooked the comfort-food noodles for gallery goers is not included, although a predecessor work featuring ingredients for and simmering pots of vegetable curry in sealed vitrines is. You are, however, invited to share a bowl of Tom Kha or German pancake soup; have a cup of Turkish coffee; make music in a fully equipped rehearsal room; showcase your talents in a "demo station;" use telephones to chat with strangers in other galleries or battle it out over slogan-emblazoned ping-pong tables. You also are offered object- and video-based reflections on an international life by an artist with studios in New York, Berlin, and Chiang Mai who has made it his quest to understand Western values and his place in the world.

Diving into the exhibition's playful, disarming swirl of self-generating institutional critiques and explorations reversing ethnography's traditional flow from developing to developed nations is great fun. Art may at heart be about escaping solipsism, the feeling that you're alone with your perceptions. But this exhibition, with its myriad points of connection to other visitors and the larger world, makes anti-alienation its mission. When slipping into the chatty, impromptu micro-communities that coalesce around its activities and messages, it is hard not to get an exciting dose of fellow-feeling.



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *untitled 1994 (angst essen seele auf)*, 1994. Installation view: Rirkrit Tiravanija: DAS GLÜCK IST NICHT IMMER LUSTIG, Gropius Bau, 2024. © Gropius Bau. Photo: Guannan Li.

Key to Tiravanija's self-generating institutional and political critiques, and revelatory flâneur-like approach is a low-key alchemy of the everyday. Ordinary actions are transmuted into opportunities for new perspectives. Tiravanija, who teaches a seminar at Columbia University entitled "Making Without Objects," is careful not to prescribe any specific instructions or significance to his works. Instead, he sets up open-ended scenarios that gently point to larger real-world forces.

The exhibition begins with a small text work from 1987 emblazoned on the wall of an empty gallery that reads, "We demand the return of our cultural artifacts from the museum of the Art Institute of Chicago, otherwise we will blow it up." The artist, who was born in 1961 in Buenos Aires to a diplomatic family and grew up there and in Bangkok, Addis Ababa, and Toronto, recalls his dismay at seeing Asian devotional and utilitarian objects sealed up in museum cases after

enrolling in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1985. This experience catalyzed his lifelong attempt to locate himself as an Asian artist in the Western world.

Central to his investigations, all of which substitute generosity for the violence threatened in this early work, is a quasi-Marxist attempt to infuse contemporary art with use value. Famously, he spoke about taking pots out of vitrines and cooking in them or, more colorfully, removing Duchamp's urinal from its pedestal and pissing in it. His overarching goal is to take contemporary art's radical ideas to the streets, to apply them to practical situations. His goal, he says, is anti-monumental, leaving not things but ideas behind, and his materials are prosaic: inexpensive hardware-store accouterments like electric woks and tents or an old Opel Commodore car in which he and the painter Franz Ackermann fitted with a portable kitchen and drove from Berlin to the Lyon Biennial.



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *untitled 1995 (bon voyage monsieur ackermann)*, 1995. © Rirkrit Tiravanija. Courtesy the artist.

Only one work, *untitled 2008 (everything will be chrome)* resembles the spectacular objects we expect from artists at Tiravanija's level of fame. It consists of a freestanding mirror-walled room accessible only through peepholes hidden behind swinging, text-covered paintings. In it a hyperrealistic replica of the artist's body contemplates a clip from *Spongebob Squarepants* in which the character Squidward describes a terrifying, shiny future. As is typical of the artist's work, it is prosaic and profound. The figure's supine pose calls to mind Thailand's famous Wat Pho, or reclining Buddha monument, but instead of meditating on nirvana, he vegges out to a funny sitcom.

The installation *untitled 1994 (angst essen seele auf)* is a remnant of a two-week interactive installation at Schipper & Krome, Tiravanija's gallery in Cologne. It consists of a bar littered with empty beer and Coca Cola bottles above which a television shows the titular 1974 film *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* by Rainer Maria Fassbinder. The film, a parable of Germany's uneasy relationship with immigration that gives the exhibition its title from a line of dialogue, is, unfortunately, as relevant today as it was forty years ago. Visitors could order one of these two drinks, which the star-crossed lovers, Ali, a young Moroccan guest worker, and Emmi, an older German window cleaner, first ordered when they met at a bar. While sharing these free libations, Tiravanija gently implies, visitors could contemplate the toxic prejudices bedeviling the protagonists and their country.

The exhibition is filled with references to historic works of art that both acknowledge Tiravanija's influences and connect his work to the grand avant-garde tradition. For instance, *untitled 2024 (chance will never abolish)*, a workshop distributing free t-shirts printed with the word "Free" with two censoring bars beneath it, is inspired by Marcel Broodthaer's 1969 series of engraved and painted aluminum plates, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*), in which the text of an 1887 poem by Stéphane Mallarmé is similarly blacked out. Accompanied by crates presumably containing other t-shirts labeled "Free Sex," "Free from Body," and "Free Fall," along with dozens of drawings of participants in demonstrations on orange paper, a reference to the color of artist's trademark

sunglasses, these freebies become wearable agitprop. Like most of the exhibition's works, they are reminders of the power and agency of the individual couched in the form of a gift-giving potlatch feast.

Sociologist Émile Durkheim used the term “communal effervescence,” to describe experiences of shared emotions that can excite and unite groups. This energizing, awe-adjacent spirit pervades the exhibition and all of Tiravanija's work. You may not have plotted the next revolution with your fellow museum goers, but you surely exchanged a laugh or social-media handles with them. At the end of *Das Glück*, you leave feeling empathetically tuned-up and far from alone in art and the world.

Toby Kamps is a curator and writer based in Hamburg, Germany. From 2018 to 2023, he was Director of External Affairs at White Cube, London. Previously, he held curatorial positions at museums of modern and contemporary art in the United States.