

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA
UNTITLED, 2009
(PAY ATTENTION)
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY KATE BRETTKELLY-
CHALMERS**

Rirkrit Tiravanija ***Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)***

MONDAY 25 MAY, 2009
NEW ZEALAND, NATIONWIDE

*Rirkrit Tiravanija's One Day Sculpture project involved the mailing of an announcement card to Auckland commissioner ARTSPACE's mailing list. Tiravanija used the postal system as a means to activate an action in public space thereby drawing attention to the distinctive orange traffic beacons standing either side of pedestrian crossings in New Zealand cities. Interestingly, these are now invariably flat representations of the original spherical beacons. Tiravanija's card might be considered within the history of dispersed actions, such as Douglas Huebler's *Duration Piece # 9*, 1969, Cildo Meireles' *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, 1968 – 70, and On Kawara's postcards. Unlike these early works, however, Tiravanija's project is proposed not as an object circulating across time and space, but rather as a tactical instruction to the recipient, through which their 'attention' is drawn to something that is pre-existing in public space, something that, in itself, may already be a form of public sculpture.*

Tiravanija used the readymade of the One Day Sculpture announcement card to insert this work into the system of announcements distributed for each project during the year-long series. But, in this case, the date was replaced with 'today', suggesting perhaps the transgression of the rule that each One Day Sculpture project should operate on a specific date. The official date for Tiravanija's project was Monday 25 May 2009, but Tiravanija indicated the fallacy of such directives. The work operated when it was received. As Nikos Papastergiadis has suggested, such works are to be considered as 'circuit breakers' in the system of signs constituting our world. Claire Doherty

Commissioned by ARTSPACE
Project Curators: Emma Bugden and Brian Butler

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I am slightly embarrassed to admit that I find a particular kind of comfort in bureaucracy. There is something reassuring to be found in the systems and routines that order our days: keeping files organised, finding a book where it should be on the shelf, catching the right bus, sorting the recycling, ticking boxes and making lists. These practices are shrouded in the humble ease of the everyday. Their orderly tempo allows our bodies to smoothly negotiate cities and to live with others while avoiding friction, unease or death. Here, a sense of relief resides in the ordinary.

Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)* asks its viewers to consider such familiarities. For those in Aotearoa / New Zealand, the pedestrian crossing and orange Belisha beacons that form the basis of Tiravanija's

work are pretty commonplace. Only the attentive would notice that a small visual change is occurring to this civic amenity. The bulbous forms that sit flashing at either end of a zebra crossing are gradually being replaced by flatter versions, constructed from modern reflective material. These zebra crossings are transforming into compositions of planar geometric forms, from three dimensions to flat orange dots and black and white stripes. Nevertheless, this visual shift, a subtle two-dimensional change, is a slight one and maybe something that is easily missed. Belisha beacons are tricky in this way; they are visual devices that manipulate our capacity to award attention, or consideration, while quietly sinking into the background. They offer a momentary flashy sensation that is, nonetheless, part of our ordinary daily navigation of a populous city.

Suitably, the Belisha beacon's characteristic orange hue is synonymous with warnings and cautionary procedures in public or municipal spaces. The international trade name of this colour is 'safety orange' and it enjoys a ubiquitous existence in our visual landscape appearing on labourer's clothing, life jackets, road cones and other safety appendages. It is also a colour that has become linked to the practice of Rirkrit Tiravanija. Sidestepping public safety associations, 'Tiravanija orange' coats the white walls of galleries and covers the minimal and comfortable furniture that hosts crowds of people who come to eat, talk, play music or hang about in these spaces. A glimpse of orange is common in photographs of Tiravanija's projects and events; it appears consistently in documentation of people cooking, film screenings, public talks and other gregarious activities. One might suggest that this orange has become synonymous with Tiravanija's art practices of the 1990s, multiple bodies of work that are so influential they have provided a coordinate (maybe even a beacon) for contemporary discussions about art as a mode of social activity.

Of course, this particular orange is also a familiar colour in South East Asia and Thailand, where Tiravanija spends part of his time. Different shades of the saffron hue can most often be seen wrapped around Buddhist monks, suggesting the importance of Buddhism in this region. Aside from the visual sensations of hue, the colour orange is also a vessel for concepts and identities, a container of ideas and political representations. As a child, I can remember realising this interplay between object, sensation and idea upon learning with a great deal of wonderment, that the Maori word for the colour orange was not *arani* (an English transliteration and the word for the orange fruit) but *karaka* (the colour of the berries of the *karaka* tree).

The flat, orange discs of colour in Tiravanija's photograph of a pedestrian crossing are the visual focus of *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)*. Nevertheless, I do not want to propose that this work is about the nature of the colour orange in particular. Tiravanija's postcard is not forthcoming in the sense that it would suggest a specific set of artistic enquiries. We are asked to pay attention, but to what exactly?

Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention) appears to be not so much an attempt to draw our awareness to a particular subject (the colour orange or the changes in zebra crossings, for instance), as an attempt to ask us to reflexively consider our own looking, our own means of

paying attention. It is a work that is caught up in the character of the orange Belisha beacon; somewhere between the glowing hue that attracts our gaze and the ubiquity of its existence in our everyday.

It is the capacity for this work to quietly slip into our everyday lives that I find most intriguing. Regular audiences of the *One Day Sculpture* series might readily recognise the postcards that advertised the artist, location and date of a particular work. Approaching the end of this series, a comparison to other projects is unavoidable and, unlike many of those, *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)* eschewed a certain spectacular appeal. Easily overlooked, Tiravanija's work has a sort of humdrum character that belies its imperative to 'pay attention'. When I received my postcard in the mail I very nearly missed the work itself. I had to fish it out of a recycling basket several days later where it had inadvertently found a home amongst the other papery bits and pieces that float in and out of my life.

The postcard is yet another piece of exhibition ephemera, like the kind you might find at any art organisation. These beautifully designed paper invites, bearing carefully chosen images and texts, circulate around our central focus on the exhibition or experience of art practices. In a sly conceptual turn, Tiravanija has made an artwork out of one such piece of ephemera.

This is where things start to get tricky. On a practical level, the *One Day Sculpture* postcards offered a reminder of the series' unique curatorial format, which requested projects to exist for the duration of a single day in a specific locality in New Zealand. Nevertheless, Tiravanija politely eschews these guidelines, indicating on his postcard that the work occurs 'today' in unspecified locations nationwide. Perhaps *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)* happened or was activated when it was received, maybe it is still happening right now, or maybe it is always happening. The clear-cut framing offered by the *One Day Sculpture* curatorial structure has been tampered with. Indeed, the work dissolves any distinction between curatorial frame and artistic content. The postcard does not only function as an advertisement, it is not just an ancillary invite or means of drawing attention to

a particular artwork, it is the artwork itself. If you're not paying attention, this can trip you up.

In a broader sense, this work also questions our use of time as a framing device; a means of both capturing and measuring experience. Tiravanija's postcards surely arrived at different places at different times, but on which day can we say that this work actually unfolded? When is the 'today' of *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)*? In this way, Tiravanija's work loosens the hold time has on our encounter with artworks and artistic practices. It occupies a space in our everyday lives in which measured and quantifiable time starts to fray at the edges. When did those usually round beacons become flat? When did this change to our everyday experience of a public amenity occur? It seems that after each old-fashioned bulb blows, it is replaced by a circular disk that offers a constant reflective shine – a giant orange cat's eye. A chain of small lights is gradually dimming and, in their place, we are presented with a sprinkling of orange holes. This is happening every day and while we might recognize that a change has occurred, strangely enough we can't quite pin it down.

For all the ease and conviviality associated with Tiravanija's practice, an element of awkwardness can exist in his works. It is a subtle unbalancing, an indirect institutional critique that toys with the principles and politics of the way we exhibit and experience art. In that it avoids suggesting a time and place for the work to unfold, *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)* also neatly evades the economy of images of which invites and post-show documentation are a part. Temporary and participatory works like Tiravanija's often find a tradeable afterlife in photographic imagery and documentation which offers an indexical relationship to a past event or activity. This work undermines the capacity of documentation to represent, to act as a surrogate for experience. It cannot be efficiently captured because it does not offer a singular experience or momentary act to document or talk about at a later date.

Of course, that is exactly what this text is attempting to do. It places me in a bind because these words are exchanging themselves for the experience of receiving a postcard in the mail. However, I am not embarrassed to admit that I find *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)* conceptually troubling in a subdued way. It is difficult to develop a written response to

this work because it does not overtly discuss an issue or idea – there is no singular experience to be had. Although I have written about the change from three-dimensional to flat Belisha beacons, this is my own interpretation of a work that is so open-ended that it could garner many more divergent readings.

Perhaps this is where the difficulty lies. It seems to me that much of Tiravanija's work is not specifically about anything. It doesn't have content in a conventional sense. A viewer could participate in one of Tiravanija's projects – eat a freshly cooked meal in a gallery, watch some bands practising or listen to a lecture – but they could not easily summarise these experiences around a single theme or topic. They could not, for instance, suggest that Tiravanija's work was about the process of making music or about the power dynamic between those who cook and those who eat. This is why *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)* presents a particular difficulty for the *One Day Sculpture* curatorial delineation of artworks. Unlike other projects which spoke to a specific issue (for instance, SUPERFLEX's focus on the syntax of our financial systems), Tiravanija's offers no content to frame in the space of a day, and no distinction between frame and content.

In that it cannot be easily captured or communicated, *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)* is quietly subversive. Through understated means, it confronts our practices of considering and comprehending artworks. Just like crossing the road, these conventions of looking and experiencing become ordinary and everyday. Sometimes, we just don't stop to think about them. Tiravanija offers a release from such a boundary and guideline, but also removes the comfort that they bring. He places the task of interpretation and participation firmly at the foot of the viewer and this can be a bewildering experience. Freedom comes with bountiful possibility, but it also comes with responsibility and confusion. It is not for everyone.

Rirkrit Tiravanija

Calling New York, Berlin and Chiang Mai home, Rirkrit Tiravanija is the embodiment of the nomadic artist. Inherent to itinerant lifestyle is the constant flexibility, negotiating between cultures, requiring a redefinition of self within the context of place and situation that ultimately serves as inspiration. Tiravanija turns the flux of his nomadic lifestyle into a fluid narrative between art and life, transcending the lines between conventional gallery space and convivial social space. Throughout his creative practice, Tiravanija's work is consumed without being owned, a subversive act that questions the usual roles between gallery and audience, giving and receiving, ownership and property. Solo exhibitions include 'Retrospective' (Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2004), 'Social Pudding with SUPERFLEX' (Los Angeles: 1301PE, 2004); 'dAPERTutto' at the 48th Venice Biennale (1999); and the International Sydney Biennale (1998). For the 50th International Venice Biennale (2003) Tiravanija co-curated 'Utopia Station'.

Recommended Reading

Mathias Dusini, 'Rirkrit Tiravanija', *frieze*, Issue 71 (November 2002)

Gridthiya Gawewong, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Rochelle Steiner, Philippe Parreno, Bruce Sterling, Francesca Grassi, *Rirkrit Tiravanija* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2007)

Sherri Geldin and Rein Wolfs, *Rirkrit Tiravanija: Supermarket* (London: Art Data, 1999)