

# The Battle for Good Artists *Part 3*



Rirkrit Tiravanija:  
*Untitled (The Magnificent  
Seven, Spaghetti Western)*  
2001, steel floor plates,  
propane cookers, cast steel  
pots, Arcopal bowls, metal  
forks, trays, wooden cutting  
boards and one tom yam  
gai recipe. Museum M+,  
Hong Kong

It has been a dreadful year. Perhaps, for some of us, it was a good one. From what phase of “linear art history” are we now slowly emerging? Most of us were socialized in the assumption that an arc could be drawn from ancient Egypt and the Greeks to Joseph Beuys or Andy Warhol. Western museums proclaimed growth and progress in this sense. Our world after 1500 began with Johannes Gutenberg, with Christopher Columbus, with the contact between Europe and America. Equipped with knowledge of Latin or even Greek, we were excited that a Renaissance in Europe had given birth to a network of artists, merchants and agile rulers. Outmoded boundaries were overcome, a lively exchange of ideas ensued between nations. The rise of pan-European trade emerged and with it an unprecedented flowering of civil society. Ships sailed forth from safe havens to the two American continents. On a smaller scale, voyages to Asia were also undertaken, at first mainly by Portuguese merchants. **When the Medici and the Fugger family took an interest in great art and looked beyond their national borders to replenish their collections, they were acting primarily as entrepreneurs and also as bankers. Their all-embracing enterprises extended to many distant places.** Art history served as a mirror to this growth, this greatness. What we have repressed is a capitalism that legitimized systematic land grabbing and the expulsion and even extermination of indigenous tribes on the new continents. It was a slave economy that brought us sugar cane, tobacco, cocoa, later coffee, indigo, cotton and the newer forms of grain such as rice, dates, peanuts, corn and cassava. Together with gold and silver mined in the New World, these coveted products and exotic spices were delivered to Europe on increasingly swift and versatile ships. **Circa 1450, Spanish and Portuguese merchants initiated the forcible transculturation that was for a long time disguised as “Christianization.”** In subsequent centuries the British, Dutch and French also began to ship tens of thousands of people from Africa below deck year after year, in chains, naked, shorn, and extremely hungry and thirsty. Whether in the Caribbean, in Brazil or New York, the cultivation of the new lands was continuously carried out by the physical labor of African slaves, and also by Chinese coolies. It was only by this means that exotic crops and precious metals could be extracted for export. The cultural consequence was an enormous Creolization, for the estimated 12 million people who were recruited by West African elites alone and carried off on European ships to the southern and northern continents of America ensured a mixture with Europeans and sometimes with indigenous people.

Over the centuries, approximately 17 million Africans came to Asia as slaves through countries like Sudan. Evidence of slavery has been found in almost all cultures for around 12,000 years. “Without slavery and slave trafficking there would be no Europe”, writes Michael Zeuske. **It was Europeans who used land theft, slave labor, and highly successful entrepreneurship in a plantation economy to forge a world civilization and, for a few decades in consort with the Americans, our well-functioning consumer society.** The pandemic is now slowing our pace, and China’s speed may be curbing our progress as well. We are becoming aware of Africa as a source of unpaid human energy that was exploited for millennia. At the same time, climate change is knocking on our door. **2020 has been a year of awakening. We are coming to recognize that our belief in religions, in elites, in supposedly superior and inferior ethnic groups served economic and political purposes.** Our edifice of truths is starting to look like a house of cards, already collapsing in parts. All of a sudden we see artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija. Many years ago, coming from Thailand, he painted “Less Oil More Courage” on one of his canvases, and went on to cook Thom Kha Gai and Pad Thai for visitors of galleries and museums instead of just exhibiting or selling works in a traditional medium. We encounter the Swiss artist Not Vital, who already in 1993 placed his “Camel on Ski”, a small bronze figure, on a 430 cm long plaster runner as part of Art Basel. **Suddenly, for us too, cold and hot, mountain and desert, Europe and Africa are coming together.** We are drawing less rigid boundaries and are less prone to segregate ourselves. We no longer look askance at others but try instead to climb onto our own shoulders. At the moment it seems difficult to aspire toward a tangible future, but what counts in art is less and less tradition but rather the artist’s particular world and habitat, his or her pursuit of self-chosen goals, inventing and designing with an audacity that is not bound by obsolescent ideals. More than ever, new experiments, both social and artistic, are called for. Moreover, the good artists often come from Africa, the source of power for a globalized humanity for more than a thousand years. Expressive dancing, trances and drums, tango and reggae, the rhythmic beat of popular music – these are not the only gifts we owe to the generations of people with roots in the African continent.

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