

On Contact  
Jimmie Durham

On Contact  
Jimmie Durham

On Contact  
Jimmie Durham

On Contact  
Jimmie Durham

Each year the MuHKA looks for a text to mark the New Year. This time we asked Jimmie Durham for his thoughts. He sent us the unpublished text *On Contact* from 2003. We combined it with a text that he produced for the Documenta IX project *An Approach in Love and Fear* core pieces of which are in the MuHKA collection and with the three poems he wrote during the exhibition *Academy* which took place at the MuHKA in 2006.

On Contact  
Jimmie Durham

On Contact  
Jimmie Durham

On Contact  
Jimmie Durham

Contact  
Durham

## On Contact

This year [2003] I am 63 years old, and the reason I say it is that it is essential to a confession which follows.

In the second week of January I was in one of Berlin's busiest subway stations. I started down the stairs to the train level on the wrong side of the stairs just as a large crowd of people started coming up. Instead of moving over to the right side I put on my most determined and stern look and continued down, only to confront a man who was determined not to yield. We hit full-body once, twice, three times. But he was stronger, and finally I yielded, cursing him.

I had promised myself ten years earlier to give up physical fighting, and, having lost the fight, I was full of shame. I intend to be a civilized and mature intellectual—even a kind and considerate person. Well.

When I got down to the train level I said to myself, "From now on I will carry a knife", and imagined how surprised my opponent would be when he felt the blade in his belly. Then I thought, "No, no, just a stick, like a club. I'll carry a strong stick",

and imagined the poor fool choking after I had crushed his throat with it.

These kinds of thoughts went on for a much longer time than I want to write about, but after awhile, the adrenaline storm abated, and more genuine shame descended. I had a great urge to try to find the man and apologize. I wanted to thank him for showing me a very stupid side of myself that I had needed to face.

By the time I reached my destination, however, I was once again saying, "I'm going to carry a knife from now on."

My destination, however, was a city bus stop on the street. Next to it is a small supermarket and I stood there and brooded, waiting for the bus. Close by stood a man who looked, not exactly homeless, but as though maybe he lived from place to place provided by the city. He was neither drunk nor sober.

I could see that he was considering how to speak to me. With another stern look on my face from time to time I glanced at him from the corner

of my eye, and therefore could see that he was glancing at me from the corner of his eye. After awhile he started laughing, and in spite of myself I look over to see what he was laughing at. He was reading an advertisement in the window of the supermarket, but he noticed me looking, and pointed to the advertisement.

Then he read it to me: next week there would be on sale a pocket-size device by which you could tell how close you were to another person. I also started laughing, and soon we were laughing hard.

A conversation began. He said that he was "slow in the head", and could not get a job. Besides a government allowance he collected bottles and containers to sell back to the supermarket. That day he had none that they would accept, he said.

Because I treated him normally he could see that I am a nice guy, which began to make him self-conscious. He apologized for being unshaven.

My bus arrived and in parting I gave him ten euros. I am sure that neither of us thought of

the gesture as anything but one friend helping another. If he and I are sure of our motives what does your opinion matter?

You may think that the day was already full enough but that evening I went with some friends to an Egyptian restaurant in my neighborhood. There was a belly-dancer and she came close to our table and danced in front of me. With a polite smile I looked at her eyes. The more I did the more movements she made. Finally, she both looked at and pointed to her body, to force me to focus my attention to the correct place.

Six or seven large Arab-looking guys sat at the next table. They all had short military-style haircuts, and were solemn, frowning as they spoke to each other.

The belly-dancer finished and dance music began. I asked a woman at my table to dance and some guy from another table asked the other woman at my table to dance. After a couple of songs I asked a woman at still another table, where three women sat. She refused, almost aggressively.

Suddenly, all of the big Arab-looking guys were on the dance floor, and began dancing, altogether. Two of the waiters began dancing with them, and their solemnity disappeared. Soon I was also dancing with them. Once I almost fell, and another waiter who was just passing by the dance floor, caught me from behind and got me back into the step, as though it were a typical task for waiters.

Then the three women who had refused to dance joined in, and even the last person at my own table got up and danced.

Later in the evening I noticed the belly-dancer sitting at the bar, now in regular clothes. I went over and offered her ten euros. She smiled and said, "You were supposed to put that in my dance costume." So with great embarrassment I placed it inside the collar of her blouse.

The next few weeks found me in typical isolation in my studio, until traveling to another city and being invited to dinner with old friends. A beautiful woman was also a guest, along with her male partner.

To avoid unnecessary suspense I will assure you now that 'nothing happened': We sat across from each other and spoke as often as we could to each other.

All during the evening we exchanged exciting glances and smiles; so much that I feared we were making a spectacle of ourselves.

The next day a friend who was also there reported to me that all that evening he and the same beautiful woman had exchanged meaningful smiles and glances. I said nothing.

Now I will offer practical advice: if you are about to make contact with strangers, most particularly with those of a different culture, leave all innocence behind. Goodwill coupled with innocence, or we might say, wilful ignorance, actually amounts to arrogance. We see the smiling, friendly Americans, so sure that they are not only worth knowing but worthy of our love, as they trample around the globe asking a thousand questions.

Bring no questions to a meeting with strangers, but assume a stance of not-exactly-waiting. Enter the meeting hesitantly, with confusion.

Unter den  
01.  
Jimmie Durham

Unter den Linden  
02.  
Jimmie Durham

Unter den Linden  
03.  
Jimmie Durham

**Unter den Linden**

1.

*It has been at least thirty–five years since  
Michel Porret showed me his poem  
About the great old Linden tree  
Struck down by a storm.*

*In his village of Saubraz, there  
In the square where, his poem declared,  
Villagers still spoke their own old language  
When the tree was young.*

*The storm had entered the village at least  
Thirty years earlier, so we can imagine  
That the tree has been gone maybe  
As long as seventy years.*

*I have forgotten what the tree was called  
In Michel's old language or in mine.  
It is 'basswood' in American English,  
'Lime' or 'Linden' in England,*

*Although 'Linden' is the German plural.  
Yesterday after many years I left Berlin  
Without ever having learned German.  
The air was heavy with the perfume of Linden blossoms.*

**Unter den Linden**

2.

*A pleasant, soporific tisane may be made  
From the flowers of 'Tilleul', as the French  
Call it. [in Berlin I lived in the old French  
Huygenot quarter called 'Moabit', mais mon atelier  
Ete' dans le foret 'Grunewald']*

*And from the stringy inner bark comfortable  
Summer shoes and sewing–thread.*

*The wood of Basswood, or Linden, is dense  
But pliant, good for the detail needed,  
In the old days, for scientific wood–cut  
Illustrations of human anatomy.*

*And the sticks of this wood  
Still are best for making charcoal for artists.*

*I am myself an artist but cannot draw well.  
Could anyone draw lost forests?  
Yet I hope we all remember the pleasant  
Expressions from that old language in the square  
Of the village of Saubraz*



**Unter den Linden**

**3.**

*Pre-Europe was plains and vast moist  
Savannahs. Forests grew up around humans  
Around fifty thousand years ago.*

*Noble and generous Hazelnut trees grew, Oaks  
With their mast, Linden, Birch and Beech from which  
Later Europeans made most everthing.*

*O trees, forget our sins, remember  
Our old prayers.*

Approach  
and Fear  
Jimmie Durham

Approach in Love  
and Fear  
Jimmie Durham

Approach in Love  
and Fear  
Jimmie Durham

## Approach in Love and Fear

For a long time there were only plants. Although in their initial ascendancy they killed most of the existing life on earth by releasing large amounts of poisonous oxygen, plants are not basically aggressive. They process sunlight and a few minerals.

When animal life developed its very definition was to move about and eat other life. Without other life to consume, animals die. Therefore animal life developed more and more proficiency in attacking and consuming; first, mouths evolved, then concentrated bunches of nerves to better direct the mouth, then a sense of smell to help the mouth differentiate, then a sense of hearing and sight, then a continual complexity of the bunch of nerves to organize actual brains. Our brains are close to our mouths because their primary purpose is to save those weapons of destruction. When I was a child I grieved that we killed any animal that crossed our paths and ate its flesh. Plants we would often pull completely from the earth, so that we could consume the roots as well as the leaves. And I saw that we were not the only ones; all of the other animals had the same voracious cruelty.

We had to cringe in fear. Any animal unable to fear would not be successful. You must kill, and fear death.

Mammals, then, as a strategy for survival, developed emotions. We might say that emotion is a secondary definition of mammalian life.

But we cannot say that the emotion of fear is primary. Love and fear must be simultaneous. Because every animal, even your boyfriend, has a mouth with some sort of teeth, one cannot easily allow an approach. Non-mammalian animals overcome this problem of reproduction by what we call "ritualistic instinct"—patterns of behaviour that automatically trigger certain responses. But mammals have overridden the instinct for reproduction with an emotional [and of course it is also physical; *everything* is "also physical"] desire to mate, to have a mate. We have developed emotions of love and of delight in the voluntary denial of fear.

More, mammalian mothers can love and fear for their young. That allows us to produce fewer young so that the individual can be better protected. Those two kinds of love can easily expand

to a phenomenon more important than survival. Recently I saw on the highway to Mexico City, a stray dog risking her life to try to save another dog which had been hit by a car. Saint Dog—Holy dog, but not uncommon.

With humans, every individual is capable of what we call “mother love”, and we can even extend it to the love of other species.

We can love each other and the cat and the mouse.

We also articulate. A fox in a cage knows sorrow and grief for the dangerous freedom of her lost home, but I can miss individual Hickory and Black Walnut trees, and the little translucent salamanders of my lost home; as I remember the constant death and suffering.

We live under such a beautiful curse, all the more a curse because we find so much beauty here. What is there other than this physicality? Not “transcendence”, not “heaven”, but our knowledge of the intolerable situation and a love of all of us.

Cuernavaca, 1992