

Published in *Art Monthly*, February 1994. No 173, pp.7-11, London

Jimmie Durham

Interviewed by Mark Gisbourne

MARK GISBOURNE: In a work like *Caliban*, 1992, as with others in your ICA exhibition, one notices a sense of deferred identification or personal displacement. Is this what you intended?

JIMMIE DURHAM: In a certain way I did. I did these works specifically for New York last year and I was trying to figure out how I might address a certain situation with what are called minority artists in New York, without anyone knowing that I was doing it unless they wanted to know.

As “minority artists” we feel a need to use art to search for our identity, which is a strange mind-set to me. It seems terribly self-indulgent and goes nowhere, it seems like the most crass way of presenting some fictional sense of self to the public and, if the public believes it, it can somehow come to be understood to be yourself. It is as though you are inventing a human self and hoping to get paid for it. And, it worked so well in the beginning—in the late 70s and early 80s, I don’t remember—that it became the law whereby all minority artists had to do work that is primarily about our identity.

MG: Are you thinking of people like Basquiat?

JD: I exclude Basquiat because there was a kind of integration in his work that I don’t see much after him. Afterwards we get kind of instructional, kind of confrontational: “This is to be my identity and it’s not yours. Ha! Ha!”

MG: Do you mean a territorial sense of identity and culture?

JD: Yes, that is precisely it.

MG: *Caliban*, as the half-man, half-beast says, “You taught me your language and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language.” Do you feel that contact with the now prevailing white hegemony has done this to Native Americans?

JD: Very much so and at the same time Shakespeare has *Caliban* kind of liking to say that. There are always two edges to him, that is the way Shakespeare writes, I suppose.

MG: Though I know that you have retracted much of your famous 1974 essay, “American Indian Culture,” what has remained valid from what you said at that time?

JD: I have to explain a little bit of history about it. I was trying not to be a Marxist but to use what used to be called Marxist thought, and I was doing that because I had just before that moved to Geneva and whilst there I met a bunch of people who were in Geneva at the UN, activists from the African countries that were just getting free, and they naturally were all Marxists. These people were all my teachers, most of them much younger than me, very

many of them had been to Oxford and they had an education that I didn't have. They explained the world to me in a way that I couldn't explain it before. I used to say to them at the time that the problem with Marxism is the "ism." You have to believe a set of rules which puts a limit on things and why should we have to live with limits? They would always answer dogmatically that everyone has an ideology and I did not have any argument for that, for I want my ideology to be called "I hope I don't have an ideology." At least I can pretend some freedom of thought. But, I think what is still important to me from that paper is thing to make an analysis of exactly the way that white English works against us. Because English is not just a language, it is a politics and a form of colonization... It's really a form of politics.

MG: Has that situation altered much since the seventies?

JD: I think that maybe it will change in the U.S., but as yet it has not changed. I think what has happened instead is that a language of multi-culturalism has been developed as a new way of consuming other cultures more thoroughly than they were consumed before. But there is something more to think about here, for American white kids speak the street slang of American black kids, very artificially, consciously, and they speak it to be hip or with it. That is to say, they consume someone else's attempt to free English for themselves, and the way white kids take it back as though they could somehow own that black English.

MG: In the performance video that accompanies the exhibition you mediate a sense of alienation by interviewing yourself both in the first and second person, the "I" and the "you," only to emerge as yet a third person, the "he," Jimmie Durham. It reminds me of Max Ernst who invariably referred to himself in the third person. Is there any sort of connection there?

JD: I hadn't thought of it before but I am sure there must be, because artists live with art history whether we want to or not, it becomes assimilated and we forget. I think of Jimmie Durham as a public character, I have another name that is my private name. But I don't really think of myself as that name either and there is in any case a problem of being an artist which is that you do something for a public, and must do it totally privately, and then put it out totally publically, free of your privacy.

MG: Do you feel that you have to keep your private name as a way of holding something back?

JD: Yes, that's the idea. If someone knows your real name they have a great power over you, they can say bad things about you that become true or more dangerous because they know some reality about you.

MG: If you looked at Western art in this century, who would you see yourself identifying with? There are elements that have Surrealist and Imaginist associations.

JD: It's exactly that they put a value on the imagination and the will to imagine. I also love Marcel Duchamp; I love his love of objects and his love of the sensuality of objects, and the beauty of objects. Though people have explained to me that I have completely misunderstood Duchamp.

MG: Well, maybe you have and maybe you haven't, but I think that you share an interest in the powers most generally described as alchemical, and in notions of transmutation. He's a magus figure in that sense. It is hard to know whether Duchamp loved anything, he is such a

strange fish, in a way that Beuys isn't. And Beuys is someone else I might think of in relation to your work, if not in the materials or objects he uses, but in a sense of a certain view of imagination. Do you like Beuys's work?

JD: It is often so problematic for me, because it's kind of self-consciously, or Germanically, distancing.

MG: Thinking about the video, does non-linear narrative, as white anthropologists called it, or what Surrealists called magical thinking, function as a subversive strategy in your work, or is it an extension of your nature and how you see the world?

JD: Um! That's complicated. I imagine I think basically the same as I used to think when I was a child. If you make something right, or with some sort of integrity, in a way I can't quite explain, potentially it can be alive, it can have some sort of power. I do not like to use the word power, it is such a silly word, but such as to be some sort of active power...

MG: Inner life?

JD: Yes, that's it!

MG: Coelacanth, the book that accompanies the exhibition and which centers on a hunt for the now extinct coelacanth, is obviously linked to the idea of a form of cultural extinction as the major export of colonialism. This was a position you certainly held 20 years ago. Do you still believe that?

JD: Probably, but not in the same way. I don't want to imagine that I have gotten softer or wiser, things we seem to get as we get older. I don't want to get older in that sense, I want to stay full of rage.

MG: Yet your work is ironic and witty, whereas before, in your writings, there was a sort of burning anger; a sort of "in your face" type anger?

JD: I suppose when you stack up a number of years, a whole bunch of experiences, the experiences get to be not so heavy because there are so many they can't possibly maintain their weight. When you see so many of your friends die and certain things didn't get resolved between them there is something very funny about it. But there is also a kind of fineness. There is something about death that is so completely out of the question.

MG: Although you come from a Native American background, I don't feel that your work is particularly totemic or fetishistic in the conventional sense.

JD: I don't think so at all. People read it that way because they have already heard that I am Cherokee, if they had heard that I was German, they would read it with a different set of screens.

MG: Do you feel in any way constrained by the fact that the language that accompanies so much of your work is the language of appropriation, white man's English?

JD: I kind of like it actually. It's fun. I live in Mexico now and I have a great frustration with the Spanish language, because in Spanish there is no etymological dictionary. The Spanish

just don't think that way. The most they are willing to say is that this word comes from Greek or that from Latin and nothing more; never that this word comes from Arabic, or this is a Hebrew word, nothing of that. I always need to know the whole life of a language as much as I can.

MG: Is that a compensatory feeling, being a Native American, a displaced person—decentered?

JD: Yes, it could possibly be that.

MG: A yearning for the root or something?

JD: Yes, certainly.

MG: Why have you chosen to live in Mexico?

JD: The first practical reason was that I was living in New York and I could not afford it. I had no place to work and I was getting stupider in the New York sense of always being so busy—you think that being busy amounts to smartness, to a sense of sophistication—and it wasn't. But really I had no more money to live there, I just couldn't do it, and I was not willing to live anywhere else in the U.S., except New York. What I like about New York is that it hates the U.S., and the U.S. hates New York, it's like an immigrant ship that pulled in; Manhattan is like a ship that it does not want to come into port.

MG: I can understand that, but again New York is very violent?

JD: It's very violent in the sense that it is American, but it is the safest city—it has the lowest crime rate. It's terrible isn't it that Detroit and Houston are competing as the murder capital of the country. And then, I have always loved Mexico and have always felt that there was potentially something that I could do in Mexico, but now I begin to think probably not. But there are so many Indians in Mexico, you shall not deny us there, you cannot even say that you haven't met a good one.

MG: Would you say something about the displacement of Native American culture? Where is it at? Where are the Native Americans now? Are they an extinct people? Are they consigned to history?

JD: This is a point that we are now beginning to think about, that is, myself and a crowd of my friends, but it will think soon be on the Indian agenda. Firstly, how can we think of ourselves and our history instead of someone else's given narrative? That sounds like just a little first step but over the past ten years we have been talking about "who we might have been." Who could we possibly have been before Columbus, before the Pilgrim Fathers and how would we be able to know who we were? We have now come to the conclusion that we were probably pretty much normal human beings, much like other human beings. This is a sort of a revolutionary beginning for us because of this "noble savage" thing. Going from there, we discuss who are we now—if we were not anyone special at any given point in history, if we are not who they say we are. We refuse to try to be anyone's idea of who we are. How would we then be able to survive as communities and, if we don't want to have a set idea of who we are, then what sort of survival.

MG: How does one get through the layers—300 or 400 years or so of accretion that has lain on you like cement?

JD: I think it might be possible in the same way that I was talking about earlier; you can't always be full of rage because the experiences become increasingly light, because you have so many of them. It might work for us in the same way, for now we begin to joke about how much television we watch on the Reservation. In a few years we might find a way to think about being Indian in the world without any definition, without any given set of things that one does.

MG: I do not see your art as just an exposition of the cultural and historical experience of the Cherokee Nation, there seems something even bigger at stake, that is to say, the nature of "difference" and "otherness" itself? How it functions alongside a dominant consumer materialism in our age? It is as if the free imagination itself is also at stake, is that what you feel?

JD: I don't want to do work that has as its purpose the exclusion of someone or something. How might that happen? That is a more complex problem now than we wish it to be, for art always has the signs of art. Even now, especially in places like Los Angeles, there is a new sign of art (that is called "no sign of art here," and it is of course a very recognizable sign of art as the California "Funky" School. So it's always a kind of a trap.

MG: You mean a kind of anti-art? But that's a position as old as modernism itself!

JD: Yes, anti-art is just a way in. Is this art? It's always kind of art. How does one do something that is not expected? That's the problem that I work on, how to do something that people do not expect and that I also don't expect.

MG: You installed the works in the ICA space yourself, are you happy with how it has worked out?

JD: Yes, I am very pleased with the look of it, it looks to me like a dispersed Louise Nevelson work. It is a very funny space that looks like it might be a space in Bedlam. In pictures of Bedlam you see a big room full of suffering people who are not doing the right things.

MG: Is it a function of the animistic imagination in your work in the Native American sense or is this animistic-cum-animal crossover world intended to be something more in works like Rabbit, 1990, The Squirrel and Armadillo, all of 1991?

JD: I often think about a division that is the classical division in Western philosophy and culture: the physical versus the mental, the ideal versus the material, intellectual versus sensual. What I am trying to work out is my own theory so that I will not feel so stupid, because I always embarrass myself being unable to make the division. Maybe I am trying with my work to challenge the dichotomy that these things are physical and those things are mental, and that you cannot combine the two.

MG: What sort of response would you hope for from the show here? What can we learn in our exclusionary practices of minorities both in the art world and in culture generally?

JD: To look at the work without any expectations, to look at the work sensually and intellectually without the screens and without being so quick to form a conclusion. Everyone today wants to find an answer to the problem and then move on to the next problem.

MG: In a short while after this interview you are going to give a performance, would you talk about what performance means to you?

JD: It came about originally by accident. I started doing theatre work before I started with visual art, that is before I started doing visual art that I defined as visual art. I was making things since I was a child but I didn't think of it as art, just making things. But when I got out into the world I met up with some theater people and started doing theatre with them. My performances began as theatre-based, but then I started using objects and looking at theatre itself as a kind of public display of something, and as a public display of something it tends to be communication. I don't intend communication as in conversation. I want to be more complex, more ambiguous, a communication without an answer.

MG: Yet performance remains only in the memory, and/or in the form of documentation of the event, it is therefore the most immaterial of phenomena. Perhaps more imaginative because of it. How would you ideally like your performances to be seen and experienced?

JD: Ideally, I would like people to be something like fascinated, intellectually engaged, emotionally engaged, very much so, and then at the end to be completely puzzled. To say what was that? What happened? What was that about? To go home thinking about it, keeping the ephemeral quality of the performance itself.

MG: My feeling about your work is that of an unarrested imagination, constantly moving backwards and forwards through time. What do you feel about time, as such, and the power of non-linear imagination enabling us to move more freely.

JD: I think there is no time. I think it's a funny invention, there is duration of things. If a piece of history of a people doesn't get resolved, it's not history in the sense of historical conflicts, it's the present. So, when I was growing up I heard stories of the Trail of Tears and our removal as though they were current. When my grandmother told the stories she told them as if they had happened to her and of course they had not, but of course they had happened to her because she felt them.

MG: As part of a people's collective memory?

JD: Yes, exactly. When something gets resolved then it's the past. Until it's resolved then it is the present, it's always in the present.

Jimmie Durham is at ICA, London, until February 20.