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The Center of the World Is in Several Places

Beverly Koski and Richard William Hill met with Jimmie Durham in Berlin in February 1998. They discussed some of the many projects he has worked on since moving to Europe, almost all of which have been previously unavailable to North American audiences. Durham is known both for his activism with the American Indian Movement in the 1970s and for his witty and challenging visual art and writing. He is presently spending the year in Berlin courtesy of a live/work grant from the German government.

RICHARD HILL: Can you talk about the way you've been working since you've been here in Europe?

JIMMIE DURHAM: I've actually been working non-stop. I think I moved here in '94. At that moment I was in a show in Dublin, then a private show at Micheline Szwajcer Gallery in Antwerp, and then I suppose I've been doing some sort of show every month since then. I've been ridiculously busy and quite often go into a place and do new work on site.
I did two shows in France back-to-back, one in Calais and one in Rheims. (These exhibitions were documented in a single catalogue as *The Eurasian Project, Part I*.) The main piece in the show in Calais was an *Arc de Triomphe For Personal Use*. It's made of wood, so it's lightweight and you can fold it up and take it away with you and set it up again, each time you need it. Whenever you felt like you had a triumph you could set it up and walk through it. The wood was painted bright red, yellow and blue—the art colors. I still like the piece, no one else has really liked it. I liked it so much that I even copied it for the Istanbul Biennial, last year, but 1 did it out of iron so it wouldn't look so cute, and it was painted turquoise, because the show was in Turkey. It was a way of making iron look very light, like a drawing in air. It also folds up nicely and has wheels like a wheelbarrow.

RH: Working against the associations of the weight of stone?

JD: Yeah.

RH: You've been concerned about monuments in general lately.

JD: Because Europe is so strange. It's not as old as it likes to pretend, but it has more things that it should respect than it does respect. They're willing to tear down things all over Europe, things that they should save, and at the same time they are willing to save too much. The more serious problem for us I think is a belief in monuments and a belief in architecture, as though it gives a very unarguable state statement.

I'm working on a piece here in Berlin, bringing over some stones that Hitler had carved in Sweden. It's a funny thing that he did, because the drawings look like the *Arc de Triomphe*, only bigger and better, but he didn't call it an Arc de Triomphe. He called it an Arch of Peace. Hitler himself did the original drawings, back in the twenties. That's quite strange. He wanted the piece to be in cement. It would be a giant, giant cement thing and only Albert Speer, ten years later, said no, that's not nice, let's do it in granite so a thousand years from now it will be a beautiful ruin. Hitler loved the idea after Speer told him about it. It

would have been marvelous if he had made it of cement because it would already be crumbling by now. That would be quite nice.

RH: I remember reading a quote from Speer saying he was glad the Nazis hadn't won the war because some of his monumental buildings were already starting to disintegrate and he would have been in trouble with Hitler. [Everyone laughs.]

JD: So, the stones are there in Sweden, they're carved, they're beautiful. Each one is a monument, they're so grandiose. I want to free them. I want to take them away from architecture and to take them from the evil metaphor of heavy, monumental stone. I want to free them from Hitler and Speer and I want to free them from puny human history. Because they're granite they shouldn't have to serve us that way. I want to be in the process of taking them to Berlin—we'll put them on a barge, as though we were going to Berlin, and sink them in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Well, it's actually the south corner of it, but it will look like the middle of the sea. We'll do this as a movie, with a script about these stones, about the quarries, and so on. If we make a good movie we can eternalize the stones because they become art and art is eternal, everyone says. It is also eternal because there is no more wear and tear on the stones. It's only the celluloid or whatever films are made of now. You can make copies eternally. The stones themselves will have sunk but it doesn't mean that the human labor or the history is wasted. I think that it would be freed. But, architecture will not be served. Something moving will be served. A movie, not architecture.

RH: The idea of going into water gives a sense of weightlessness again, like with your portable arch. It reminds me of those strange old Etruscan tombs where they painted the ceiling to look like the sky.

JD: I was talking about Calais—but that was a nice intervention about architecture, because it's my main concern in Europe at this moment, it's such a narrative.

Calais has been a lace-making town, they've had an industry of making lace by machines and they built their entire city around that and were quite rich. Then the lace making business went away and at the same time the machines went to Korea and to all sorts of places. The city kind of fell apart and hasn't done anything since, and hasn't wanted to do anything since. Except be Calais. It wants the lace business back. So I went to visit all the lace machines, they're a fantastic bunch of machines. I knew a little bit about the lace machines from European history, they're the precursor to computers. They're the first machines to have detailed instructions by punch cards, great big punch cards, that tell them what rows to make. It's those punch cards that then became computer instructions. So, I found in the garbage a silly hat-rack that was broken and I carved a little propeller on one broken part and it looks like two insects. I made the other just as is, except I put some cotton thread around both of them as though they were part of a machine that had broken and I put a text: "A machine desires instruction as a garden desires discipline." I like the piece very much but no one else has liked it.

I also did a show in Rheims. Rheims is the French city where all the kings are crowned. I did something completely different there. The show was called *An Anatomy Lesson* and it was about the breaking up of narrative, my own narratives, but European history narratives at the same time. I wanted to begin talking about a whole bunch of different things and then as usual interrupt myself and not talk about them. I wanted to do that deliberately in some historic way. The French don't trust art, they only trust narrative, so I wanted especially to disrupt narratives and break them, to make similar narratives and fake narratives.

I had been in Lisbon and I found some branches of a linden tree. It's a tree that we use for a lot of things and I know enough European history to know that Europeans use it for a lot of things also. I take it as tea for sleeping, it works very well for me. Traditionally at home we would make shoes and cloth and all sorts of things from the bark and the wood. It's a tree that I know very well and like very much, and I was pleased to find it in Lisbon, just at the time that I was already thinking about this show in Rheims. The Europeans used it first to make artist's charcoal for drawing and then for making woodcuts.

This Belgian doctor/artist, whose name was Vesalius, was the first medical doctor in Europe to come out of the stupidity of European history… It's important for anyone to look at European history and see that there's a layer of stupidity there; it's not genetically there, it was put there politically. They weren't so stupid before, maybe they were stupid in a thousand other ways, like anyone else might be, just like most Indians in Mexico City are made stupid by Spanish colonization. But before the Spanish colonization they had the fucking Aztecs to deal with, so there's no pure situation. But at least you can say that this specific stupidity that we witness has a history, it's not natural. You can always be unreconciled to any stupidity and be willing to be free.

Before Vesalius, doctors were reading Galen, the stupid old doctor who had theories about things but didn't look at anything. Doctors until Vesalius also didn't look at anything. They would have a scalpel and they knew what Galen said. They wouldn't examine the body, they would cut where the theory said to cut; they would give the medicine that the theory said to give. It comes from a specific overlay of political strangeness. So Vesalius had a piece of linden made into a charcoal and he had some paper and he would cut open a body and he would draw what he saw. It's kind of like the beginning of science and the beginning of art used for observation in some funny human service way. From that developed a little bit better science of slicing people open. Actually, quite a bit better, but not entirely better because they had deliberately forgotten germ theory. It was known before. Everyone knows that, to wash your hands, but Europeans had forgotten it for a long time.

With Vesalius's drawings they could cut somebody open and say, "Yeah, that's there." Instead of just brain work it was eye and hand and drawing work, it was intellectuality tied to physicality. Europe always has the craziness of wanting to divorce these two things and go to heaven. Every time it tries to it fucks up half of humanity. So it seemed like an important little piece of history to bring to Rheims and I thought, "How might I do it?" I just happened to be in the forest to make a centre of the world in Bohemia, so I took some of the two linden trees and photos about them to Rheims and made that as one beginning narrative without ever telling enough of the narrative so anyone could catch it. They could catch a few things because the show's called *The Anatomy Lesson*, or *A Progress Report*. I didn't give any specifics like Vesalius and linden trees and all of that. I gave a few phrases, I took some linden bark, some rolled up and some stretched out, and two different photos: one photo of me cutting linden bark off a linden tree and one of me being eaten by two stone lions. Then there was the text "This should explain everything." I use that text and the text "I hope this does not give you the wrong idea" a lot. The French audience thought that that piece should explain everything because the text said it should. No matter how many times I would say "No it's just that piece of paper that says 'this should explain everything,' you can see it doesn't," but they kept looking for a secret key where it would explain everything. It was a mistake to play with the French I suppose.

RH: Is there anything else we should talk about regarding the show in Rheims?

JD: The Pope has been decommissioning a lot of saints, which I think is a nice idea. His problem is that he's making new saints. All the fascists in the world are now saints. I took two

baskets of clothes, white shirts and things-they were all white—that I made dirty with a little bit of mud and hair and froze them with white glue so that they were hard. The piece is called *Shrouds and Swaddling Clothes of Decommissioned Saints*. The French said, "They're not really Decommissioned"—no one could see the piece beyond that. I am making a generalization I know, but the generalization works all the same. That show in Rheims was reviewed in the Paris magazine, *Art Presse*, as though it were work about Indian identity, my own Indian identity. There was no way that anyone could think that—except by not thinking. The reviewer didn't look at any specifics and she didn't write about any specifics. She only wrote about the show as if it was about Jimmie Durham's "Indian identity" and the "Indian struggle" and this sort of thing.

RH: I was thinking when I was preparing to talk to you that even if you approach the subject "as here's an Indian artist not doing Indian art," you're still doing an Indian story. It's a vicious circle.

JD: I never mind that—in a certain way. This woman I met just before I met you, she's doing her doctoral thesis on multiculturalism as it began to happen in the eighties, except she starts with all of the people who are already riding a dead horse, I think. She said it really is something to be the first American Indian to have a solo show in the Munich Kunstbau and of course I had to agree. It really is quite something. But not in the way she might think, not in the Jim Thorpe way—he was the first Indian to win a gold medal in the Olympics. Not that way at all. You can't remove your politics and history from the fact, you can't take the fact as they would have it taken in any sense. If she writes that it's something that there is an Indian showing in the Kunstbau, her duty is to write about what's wrong with the Munich Kunstbau, that's her duty. Her duty is not to write about what I've done to get to that position. And my duty is to try to make intellectually engaging art, wherever I might be.

RH: It seems so funny that saying "I'm an Indian artist who doesn't do the 'Indian art'" is a radical thing and yet it is. To acknowledge the insanity of it is something you can do, I guess, but I imagine it's not what you want to be talking about all the time either.

JD: I think it's a set up for us, as it is for Black artists. As it once almost was for women artists, not quite so strong but almost the same. If you make the wrong thing of it you end up parroting what they want you to parrot. I don't feel that there's any way for me not to be in the Munich Kunstbau. I'm an artist who decided to be a part of the art world that the Munich Kunstbau is part of. They couldn't keep me out.

RH: It seems to me so different from the situation of, say, Black video-makers in Britain or Germany where people there are saying we want to be able to be part of things, whereas in North America it seems to be the opposite, at least when you think of how a lot of Native people are trying not to be part of it all.

JD: For good reason. Except that it's set up for us from the beginning; we're in a no-win situation in the Americas—completely. If you're a Black American you're not in such a no-win situation because there's already a kind of forwardness to your project. Not like a Black who voluntarily comes to London from an English colony, it's not quite the same. But still there is no acceptable romantic history of American Blacks. Their project is necessarily forwardness in a certain way. Jazz music is about the future, it's about making something to get out, something to escape, to dance your way out of the stupidity. Blues is the same. We invented the blues, Cherokees invented the blues, our old spells are where it comes from and

they are spells about turning people blue. Blue rocks are going to fall on you. All these blue things in these songs make people sick and they would get sick and they would get blue.

We only get to protect our culture, we don't get to make a new thing. We get only to tell about the past, to tell about traditions, or to protect our traditions, we don't get to move forward, the way jazz moves forward, the way the blues moves forward. So we have blue spells and they're kind of useless to us. The Blacks took them and they were useful to them so I'm perfectly wil1ing to let the southern Blacks have the blues, it helps all of humanity.

I feel always potentially smarter in Europe because I am potentially a homeless orphan. I can be ready to intellectually engage with whatever situation is there tomorrow morning. I've not experienced it yet because, of course, the romanticism is still there, but I feel that I might have that potential. Every review of my work in Europe reads, "Cherokee artist…" Every single one. In France it's worse. In Calais my show happened just as a stupid French movie called *An Indian in the City* came out. It's about an Amazon Indian who comes to Paris, so the headline of the big full-page review of my show in Calais was "An Indian in the City."

RH: I know artists in Toronto who are trying to justify being in the city, to be an Indian in the city. But that you even have to say that…

JD: It's strange, huh? It's a set-up, it's a complete set-up. Whatever you do in the Americas is a set-up.

RH: I've been thinking about this story about my grandmother since I got here. My grandmother got kind of obsessed with Europe. She wanted to go visit Europe and she did, she went by herself on a tour. When she got back she told me that her grandmother had said to her that whenever you are somewhere or you're looking at something it belongs to you. She said, "The whole time I was in Europe I just thought that." She went around Europe claiming everything for herself.

JD: Nice. When I got back from Siberia, I called my older sister and bragged to her that I'd been in Siberia. She said, "Oh yeah, my friend went and she found a husband there."

BEVERLY KOSKI: Speaking of Siberia, can you talk about the *Poles for the Center of the World*?

JD: It's an ongoing project—it hasn't finished yet. I don't feel that I live in Europe, I feel that I live in the continent called Eurasia, which is an unknowably large continent. That's what I 1ike about it, but it's a heavy art history at the same time. And it has a history of Joseph Beuys deciding that he was a personal bridge between the East and the West, between Siberia and Europe for example. A romantic old idea of the artist as hero, that the artist could solve the problems by heroic gesture. But I like Joseph Beuys all the same; he did some good stuff. I want not to attack Beuys but to make a group of things that are "and furthermore," "and also," "besides that," "and what about this?" and that kind of thing.

I decided that every continent had seven centers. This is an arbitrary decision because I decided there were seven continents—maybe there are eight, maybe there are nine—it doesn't matter. And every village also has seven centers, and everything has seven centers. For every continent I would make a staff of the seven centers. Eurasia gets probably eight staffs because besides the seven centers there's Brussels that tries to be the economic centre, tries to be a political centre. That's the first staff I made. They're just stupid little poles, each one has a mirror attached to it in a different way. I made one in the city of Yakutsk in Siberia.

I went out to the forest and cut down a tree, a little birch tree sapling and put a mirror on it and left in front of what they call their shopping centre, a two-storey wooden building. I just leaned it up there and left it and took some photos of it. I made one in the forest of Bohemia. I also cut down a little sapling and stripped it down and put a little mirror on it. I made one in Rheims. They look a little bit like Joseph Beuys's *Eurasian Staffs*. They look as though I misunderstood. They look badly made and too literal and have mirrors where you can comb your hair in case you need to look nice.

RH: I can't help but speculate about where the centre of Canada is…

BK: How about North America?

JD: The centre of North America is several places. It's right there in the Pipestone Quarry, Minnesota, but it's also in Chalma, in Mexico. I just did a show in Pori, Finland. I put stones everywhere inside and outside the gallery, just little, kickable stones, anti-architecture. The building is a separate building and you could play with all of the outsideness of it, great big glass windows that you could see inside. I filled it completely with round stones, all the way out to the street, and all the offices and every place. I put on the wall a map of the world and an explanation about this tree in Chalma, Mexico that all the local Indians have to make a pilgrimage to. Local is within a thousand-mile radius. So people walk there, and it really is a magic tree, it's an *ahuahuete*, which is the biggest tree in the world. It's big around but it's not tall. It's a great, great giant *ahuahuete* and it has a spring coming from the bottom of it. That's magic isn't it? Everyone goes there, and they put little carvings of their children there to connect themselves with the center. If your parents remembered to do that, you are always connected to that centre. You have to walk there and as you're walking you should kick a stone toward the tree because people who chicken out are turned to stone and maybe that stone you kick is a chicken-shit Indian, whose life you might save. He might come back to life as he gets to the tree. So, I told that story and I made a suggested route from Pori, Finland, to Mexico, to the tree in Chalma. I liked the piece because the politics were very light and not didactic.

BK: Last year you were making a maquette for a public art piece in Rome. How did that go?

JD: It was a trash heap, a dump. It was the anniversary of Rome, which was 3,000 years old. They invited a lot of artists. Outside I made my monumental dump. It was marvelous doing it. We ultimately had to have security guards for the dump, because during the day people would come and they would try to take it. I helped them, I tried to say, "This is art, would you please not touch the art." [Everyone laughs.]

BK, Did anybody add to it?

JD: No one added to it, no. But the catalogue was quite nice, it's got all these famous dead artists. And I had to do a model, but I never make models. I wanted the piece to be shown in the catalogue, so I made a twenty-inch high model, that I spent almost a thousand dollars on. I had to buy little doll furniture and make things and put things together and break and glue.

BK: So it was a temporary public piece , or is it still there?

JD: I couldn't get them to listen to me. I wanted it to be a permanent public piece, but the permanency is shorter than other permanencies. If you had left Michelanglo's *David* out all

these years, it would have gone away by now. When you see a marble graves tone they disappear after 200 years. After a thousand years it's like a salt lick or something. I thought if my piece could last, in one state or another, all of 1997, it would be permanent for these days. It was outdoors and somebody had thrown away a plant and I put that in the garbage too. And I knew that some insects and some mice and rats and birds, and maybe cats and maybe dogs, maybe a ferret, who knows, would make use of the piece. I could see it also as a piece that was changing because it was constantly in use, but no one ever went back and took a single photo.

RH: One thing I enjoyed talking about the other day was the idea of the Eurasian mall.

JD: Yeah, I must certainly do that. I had the idea, well, for several reasons. One is that I was in Lisbon, a few times, because I like Lisbon. The second time I was there I went to the big new shopping mall. They're still a very poor country that really can't afford to be in Europe. They're in because they are Portugal and Europe would be embarrassed to say that Portugal is not Europe. So they have to let them in. They got European money to build this giant shopping mall. At the same moment they have a great problem with poverty. They've got all the colonials back, the crazy Portuguese who lived in Africa as rich people; they're all back in Lisbon as poor people. They also have a lot of Africans from those colonies because Portugal made those colonies poor and so they come to where they think the money is, but the money's not there. Everyone goes to the shopping mall and they walk around and eat an ice cream. Nothing happens. No one can buy anything, there's nothing to buy, just silly clothes, silly Adidases. It looks like the future to everyone because it's what Lisbon never was before. Everyone thinks, "Oh boy, we're almost in the future. We are almost out of Portugal and into Europe."

So that's where I got the idea from but also from several places. I was in Northern and Central Siberia and they're still a part of Russia. It's an area, let's say the size of half of Canada, with no railroad and no highway, no telephones, no electricity. The city of Yakutsk has electricity and telephones, no place else, and they're trying to be free of Russia. They're nice people and they hate the Russians. They say, "Let's see, we can sell our timber but we can't get it out. It's not so easy to helicopter it out, maybe we will do tourism, that's what we'll do." And that's what they're trying to do. If they could attract tourists they think it would be sportsmen who would want to come and shoot a bear, or stab a bear, or go fishing on the ice. They don't realize that Canada already has these things, and Norway, even Scotland has these things.

So, it seems logical that you could make a real shopping mall that's fitting for Eurasia, an almost infinitely large shop ping mall. You can have a pavilion for every country and you can have trips, you can have martial trips where you can actually go help fight somebody's enemy. If you're on the side of—there's a few details that have to be worked out—I was about to say if you were on the side of the Kurds you could go and fight the Turks, but that's too dangerous. You could go and fight with the Turks against the Kurds, if you like. Or with the Iraqis against the Kurds, or even the U.S. against the Kurds, because they've been in that fight too. All from the shopping mall. You could have camel rides and eagle hunts. You could go to China and you could go to Belgium. We could make railroads from Vladivostok, from Beijing, from Singapore, from Amsterdam, from Paris, all to our shopping mall-and airports, we could cover all bases. We could sell little ceramic toys of every country in the universe.

It's also a way, I think, of saving the lives of indigenous peoples. All these people starving in Tibet, the nomads in the north of Tibet, they can easily get to our shopping mall. We'll make them a special theme park because there's not many of them and by the time we

get the theme park built they'll be even less of them. Yeah, this might work well. We can do great things.

BK: I guess I should ask you about the project that you're working on here.

JD: I'm going to show it to you. [Brings out a small wooden crate.] My first idea was to try to respect this little piece of work, this fruit box, by looking at it completely. Looking at all the material and looking at how all the material had been put together. Thinking, "How the hell did they make a staple gun that goes around corners," and "Who makes the steel, who makes the wire," thinking about everything I could about this box and doing a report on what I saw. I started doing that a year ago when I moved to Marseilles where I got the box and I carried it with me all the time. There's something I didn't notice and only Magnus Ottertun noticed it.

RH: Okay, now I feel obliged to notice it as well.

JD: Yeah, it's a test, an art student test.

RH: [Looks at the crate.] No, I can't figure it out.

JD: It's these little dots in the corner [Points to colored dots that are printed at the corners of the box]. They're instructions. I didn't even see them but these dots are the instructions from before the staple gun, that said [in effect] put nail here. Isn't that nice? So it's left over very simple instructions that now have no more use.

BK: Those? [Points to the dots.] Those are registration marks for printing all the colors of the box's logo.

JD: Shit. Too bad. They were so pleased that they had figured out something that I never noticed. You need educated people to figure those things out. I see where we went wrong now.

BK: I think they serve a dual purpose.

JD: There's no such thing as a happy compromise.

BK: I'm trying.

JD: That's something that we didn't even think about: how do you print three colors on a piece of wood. The name of my essay about this box is "An Unemployed Essay on Work." So it's really just guessing everything.

My father's first job was a job where you'd go to work and they'd give you some money at the end of the week. The crew of guys, they went into the forest, cut down a white oak tree and with hand tools they sliced it up and made apple crates. That's quite a business to go from tree to apple crate just there. He tried to teach us how to do it in case we ever needed to make them, because he was so pleased with the knowledge. I'm comparing myself and my knowledge about work and architecture. If you're there too long you get something. If a building stands too long on the street it gets a layer of knowledge about traffic. If I'm an apprentice as a young man I stand around helping the older men, then supposedly their knowledge comes to me the same way. I have this layer of supposed knowledge which is actually a trap, just like soot is a trap. It's all the knowledge of the past, it's no knowledge of

the future, it's against the future. So I'm comparing my own first experiences of jobs and comparing them to a building that gets dirty.

RH: It's an inevitable process, though.

JD: But if we can find a way, a bunch of ways, to think about it instead of accepting it… I'm working now on architecture. Architecture makes you believe that it is the city when in fact our intellectuality and our desire for freedom is the city. Architecture says no, you're not the city, the state's project is the city. The state owns the city and you can build in that architectural space. And what I want—as a deliberate foreigner—I want to challenge that, to say no, we are the city, the architecture is something that we just have to move around—no matter how good or how old it is. It's like the French philosophers have already said about language: it's a dirty trap. It makes you say what it says. But if I say that language is a dirty trap, it's just that we should all intellectually know that and not reconcile ourselves to language. Maybe then more poetry would happen.

There's a monstrosity in the U.S. that the Europeans admire and that's the willingness to keep moving west and burning down what you left in the east. The Europeans are still in love with that. I can see why, because they are trapped in Notre Dame, they're trapped in Chartres Cathedral.

There's something so strange about European history. They feel that it's too heavy for them. They usually say to me, "I like to go to the U.S. because it's so free and open and here in Europe history is heavy on us." [Laughs.] I say, "Yeah, it's a matter of perspective."

RH: North American architecture is quite a horror too.

JD: It's really a horror, it's really a horror, but it's such a horror you can't even really address the issue.

RH: You can't really pretend it's anything either.

JD: Yeah. If in Paris or Berlin—especially in Berlin, because they're now trying to be the city of the future, and trying to maintain some tradition—if they save a lot of old buildings they have left and then they build some new buildings, everyone agrees that they've done more than they've actually done. Everyone says that they've preserved history, instead of that they've preserved a building. So then if you're a Gypsy from the Czech Republic or from Slovakia you say, "I'll try Berlin." You come to Berlin and you have to say either I'm not part of this or I must buy in to this, I must agree that it is history, that Berlin is history and I am not.

RH: Of course their histories are connected in a really horrifying way.

JD: They still can't say that, though. They still can't do anything with Gypsies in Berlin. They're still the troublemakers. But even if you weren't Gypsy, even if you were. To put it a different way: I was really depressed in Istanbul. It's a giant city that's been famously falling apart for 2,000 years. You want some things to be preserved; why would you not preserve some great old Byzantine cathedral? But if you preserve all of the mosques in Istanbul, which they do, and someone comes from Kurdistan who is really not Muslim, or not very Muslim, or wishes he wasn't Muslim, or just wants to dance and party in Istanbul, their only choice is to buy that history.

What I think is interesting about being an artist is to not be reconciled. You can always try to lose yourself in and investigate something, to challenge something constantly. Not just society but everything, yourself, your work, everything that you do.

RH: In the town in northwestern Ontario, where Bev's from, there really are only two alternatives. There are white people and Indians, that's virtually it, the roles are well defined.

BK: Not like Toronto, you can get comfortably lost in Toronto.

JD: That's what's good about cities; that's why people come to cities. They don't have to be who they once have been, they can be something new. I tried in New York, because I lived in an area in which about twenty languages were spoken just in our block. I thought everyday I will go out on the street dressed differently so that no one will become accustomed to what I do and I can be perfectly free and everyday somebody would say, "I never saw you in those clothes before." [Laughs.] Some version of that: "Oh, you're going to a party" or "Oh, you've been working."

I have a friend in Paris who's in school to be an art historian. She works for a gallery and she's one of those very good French people that makes France worthwhile. I said, "I wish I didn't have to work so much," and she said "stop working." I said, "I have to sell fifty pieces a year to pay my rent, get my groceries, my wine," and she said, "Oh, what a difficult translation: art to money." It's an impossible translation. To think of it as a translation.

RH: I can't even understand the translation of labor to money.

JD: It's what this box is about.

RH: It's bizarre, I get the occasional grant, I know some how that I am buying months of labor or I am being excused from it…

JD: Some Korean women making Adidases paid for it.

RH: Yeah, I know. It's horrible, it seems so distanced from anything that I can compute or that I can viscerally understand. If you put a thousand dollars into my hand, I can't understand it as hours of labor.

JD: There's no danger of that confusion happening here. [Everyone laughs.]

RH: Well it sort of happened because I can put the name Jimmie Durham down on a grant application and it does turn into a thousand dollars.

JD: I'm going to try it. I need thirty-five thousand to buy these stones.

RH: You're s till trying to buy them?

JD: If I start working on the movie, without having control of the stones, I have no control of the movie. Someone else can make it and ace me out. If someone likes the idea, they can say, "It's good, but the leading actor, Durham, he's not quite right. We need De Niro." The stones are my script.

(to be continued next issue)

Acknowledgments

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JIMMIE DURHAM

The centre of the world is several places (Part II)
Interview with Beverly Koski and Richard William Hill

RICHARD HILL: Can you tell me about the piece *Triptych as Sandwich*?

JIMMIE DURHAM: The first idea is from the title. I wasn't even thinking about using stone, but I was thinking about what a triptych was, that it is like a sandwich. It has these two side things that you usually close and it's the centre part that's the roast beef. You open up the two pieces of bread and you get to see how good the roast beef is. I thought all I had to do to make a triptych was to have something good in the centre and it wouldn't necessarily have to be a painting. I thought a nice sport coat, a nice cashmere sport coat would work. People are always inspecting sport coats just like roast beef. My first idea was to use two slabs of plywood and just bolt it together so that you couldn't open up the sandwich, to kind of break the idea of inspecting. One of my favorite pieces of art is the Mystical Lamb in Ghent Cathedral. It's a really incredible painting. It's done as a triptych and it used to be, like all these things were, a magic show. They were always closed and then the priest says, "Wanna see something?" and opens it up. I thought that the less often they were opened the more important they probably were. All I had to do was lock mine down and it would gain importance. I also thought that it would be another interesting way of playing with the form of art, with what art is supposed to look like.

I had a black cashmere sports coat and an ivory-colored cashmere sports coat and I had the stones cut to fit so that the lettuce would be coming a little bit out of the stone sandwich. The third one was smaller, the stone is called imperial red granite. What's inside is an old Belgian mail sack that everyone in Belgium would recognize. That's my favorite because it's smaller and—I don't remember—but there could still be a couple of letters inside. [Laughs.] They would be the roast beef of the roast beef. Once I made it with stone instead of in plywood this thing happened, a thing that happens in art over and over that I think keeps us artists making art. You put two things together and they begin to speak in ways that you didn't see before. Or they are going to speak—and all sorts of new things happen that give you a nice surprise. They look more politically weighty with the stone, and the color combination using the white marble with the black coloring, and black granite with the white coat gave it a kind of poetry about gravestones, clothes and bodies.

RH: It's interesting—as the artist you're maintaining control over the piece after it leaves you. It's not the priest that's going to be opening it…

JD: That's nice, yeah. I had several versions of it now that I think of that. As you must know, all the cathedrals of Europe have bull hide foundations, they're built on top of bull hides. I didn't want to tell that story by putting a stone on a bull hide but I thought if I could find a great huge heavy stone and put it on a shirt, with no possibility of escaping, it would kind of free the stone because it would have the audience's desire, the desire to "Get that stone off that poor shirt!" [Everyone laughs.] So, the stone might fill up with the desire to leave. I would be talking about cathedrals at the same time. Transcendence is what cathedrals are for—to escape the earth.

RH: It's funny how that anthropomorphization seems to creep into your work, even when it's not obvious.

JD: You can see it maybe more in the show I did in Lund, in Sweden, last year. The pieces don't look as if they've been anthropomorphized, but you can see that they're not real art all the same. [Everyone laughs.] You can see they're not just aesthetic packages.

I think we often treat civilized objects as though they are civilized objects, which is close to anthropomorphizing. We're treating them as though this was the known stuff, the real, natural scuff for humans—that this is a human chair. We have these apartments which direct us, tell us how we are, they define us physically, and then we load that up even more. One of the things I say in this book from the Vienna show [*Der Verführer und der Steinerne Gast,* "The Libertine and the Stone Guest," 1996] is that when we first became humans and when we first started attempting to use language, we began using metaphor—and then we went crazy and we've been crazy ever since. As soon as you invent metaphor, and therefore language, everything reminds you of everything else and that's crazy. That's the human condition, but it's really a sickness for artists though, isn't it?

RH: I guess it's the belief that's dangerous, when you start to believe your metaphors.

JD: That's what the state does. Its prime example is not architecture, its prime example is religion. The state comes along and says that there is truth and I, the state, have this truth. Jesus really did die on the cross for your sins. It's not a metaphor, it's true and you must believe it. I'm going to kill you if you don't. By enforcing that law they invent truth and control the people at the same moment.

RH: I've always felt that I didn't want to believe in any god that insisted that I believe in him.

JD: People in Europe always want to know anthropological things and sooner or later they say, "What is your religion like?" I say, "Well, we don't have one. We have a lot of stories about grandmother spider, but that doesn't mean we believe there is a grandmother spider."

RH: Now people do. [Everyone laughs.]

JD: I saw that in the Native American Church. From the fifties to the eightiess was a remarkable change. In the fifties, when I was part of it, the Road Man explained clearly—because it was very much mixed with Jesus in those days—that our red path is the path, Peyote is our guide and Jesus is Peyote. This is our guide just as I am your guide, this is our

correct road. It was a political statement and an obvious metaphor. By the time of the late seventies Christianity had been thrown out and the Road Man says, “Peyote will save you, believe in Peyote, Peyote has the answers.” They threw Jesus out and brought him in the back door.

BEVERLY KOSKI: Like saying the Great Spirit is God.

JD: Yeah.

RH: Maybe it has something to do with writing too, because it fixes things so absolutely. Can we talk a bit more about some of the ways that you’ve been using stone?

JD: In Stockholm I started doing some things that didn’t quite work out, but they almost worked. Some did. They are called lithographs. I do it in different ways. For example, if I want to do a lithograph using red ink I put a tube of red ink on a piece of paper and drop a stone on it. If you drop a heavy stone on a pencil, the entire pencil is shown on your piece of paper. Other times I put paint or graphite directly on the stone and then throw the stone at paper or cloth or wood or something. They’re all lithographs, which is a term I have invented. [Laughs.] It means making a graph using a stone.

In the show in Milano I tried to make the stone do some work. I made it do all sorts of things. Here it is spreading some toothpaste out of a toothpaste tube, it does all the kinds of work that needs to be done, walnuts cracked…

RH: [Looking at a photo of Jimmie hefting a heavy stone.] It looks like you’re doing all the work there…

JD: Well, you have to help stones, they don’t work on their own. If there is something that is pre-art—just as a silly idea—it would be something that’s not well developed, not well thought out and not serious enough, all of the things needed to be art. It doesn’t mean that it’s bad; it’s just not art. These are seven stones that I carry around and I show them to people, usually one at a time. [He brings out seven small stones and shows them to us.] My idea is that if I carry these stones around they will act as bait or something. They will help me think better about the freedom and mobility of stones. I have more amazing stones but I didn’t want to use very amazing stones and I have less amazing stones but I didn’t want to use less amazing stones either. You can see very plainly, all the same, that each one stands for one of the seven directions.

RH: Obviously. [Laughs.]

JD: This one is the kind that they sell to tourists all over Mexico that they call Apache Tears. It’s the most ugly piece of racism that you can imagine. And even the Apaches now sell them as Apache tears.

RH: It’s the idea of that End of the Trail Indian, that poor depressed Indian.

JD: In the Tribal Chief’s office they sell them. The flinty looking green stone is called Brazilian Blood Stone and it has little red flecks in it.

BK: Isn’t this one a polished version of this?

JD: Yeah. But it's not an Apache Tear unless you polish it. It must be a Cheyenne Tear or something. Or a crocodile tear. [Laughs.] That's from some old site that had been dug up in Mexico for a housing development. You can pick up little arrows and different things. So, showing them to people is my performance art. A small performance. When people go to the beach or the riverbank or something they always pick up pretty stones and show them to other people, and the other people never think that they're pretty. You never think that someone else's stones are pretty. You think that the person is a little dumb for liking that kind of stone unless it's diamonds or something.

BK: Have you ever seen the shore of Lake Superior north of Minneapolis in Grand Marais? There are amazing round rock beaches that are almost impossible to walk on. I threw a rock back into the water once and my Mom gave me shit: "You know how long it took to get up there!" [Everyone laughs.]

JD: [Pointing to a photograph.] I'll tell you about this piece, there's an Italian version and a Finnish version. At one end of the gallery, there's a little rifle bullet, just put on a bracket and tied on. On the other end of the gallery there's a stone stuck to the wall, also on a bracket. It's called *A Sound Installation*. The text says to take the appropriate rifle and shoot the bullet at the stone. It acts like a cowboy bullet, it ricochets and it makes a pretty noise. It makes a sound piece just by looking at it. In the gallery in Finland it's a very large piece because the gallery is so long, it's about 40 meters. As an indoor sculpture that's pretty big, 40 meters.

Europe has such a sure idea about what stone is. I like the Old Testament of the Bible. I think its got some beautiful, great stories. It's almost always stories about how the Hebrew people are meant to be nomads. Every time that they settle, they get in trouble. It's story after story saying don't settle down and don't believe things that are happening around you because it's evil stuff. So, in Munich [at the Munich Kunstverein] I'm going to try to remake a part of Solomon's temple. I like the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. All the Hebrews that were living there were supposed to leave Sodom and Gomorrah, because the Old Testament says that they were too evil. That partly meant that they were too sophisticated, too citified, too much having a good time in their city, too many parties. God told them to walk away and don't look back, but Lot's wife did look back, The way I'll explain it in Munich, when she looked back believing the city—that's what looking back was for a nomad—she became part of the architecture. She turned to a pillar of salt but she also turned into an ornamental monument in the city, she became architecture herself, just like any other stone that has to go into the service of the state.

I want to do that piece partly because Munich is where Hitler's headquarters were, it's where the Nazi roots are, and because the Jewish story is still a counter story to the European story. It's still a story they don't like because it's so much against their own stupid story of the Egyptians met the Greeks, and the Greeks met the Romans, and the Romans met us and we invented Shakespeare and then we discovered everybody else. The Europeans always say Jews are subversive, and that's true, they are subversive to that stupid story. All over Europe they're accused of being cosmopolitan and not faithful to the state, which is a nice kind of guilt, a nice accusation.

I'm looking for ways to have a conversation with Europe without having to be a pretend European or a blatant outsider, or a token outsider. Jews do that excellently well. In France and Germany especially they're hotly discovering the concept of the other at this moment—for the first time they are considering this question, as though they never saw any Jews or Gypsies.

BK: Their concept of the other doesn't include Jews or Gypsies?

JD: It hasn't even occurred to them. They want more romantic and more distant people.

BK: Indians?

JD: Indians and Africans.

RH: But not North Africa, that's a little too close.

JD: Yeah. Aboriginals are perfect. That's the most sellable ethnicity there is.

BK: You wanted to talk about the future.

JD: We're doing a show in Caracas in '99 at Sala Mendoza. It's going to be on New Year's Eve in Caracas, which is nice. It will be the Michael Stewart Memorial Art Show. He was an art student in New York in the early eighties. He was doing graffiti art in the subways and got murdered by the police. It's Maria Thereza Alves and I, and a certain number of mostly quite young artists, most of them are still students of one sort or another. They're people that I've met that are doing the kind of work that we want to play with in Caracas. Not graffiti art, but art that doesn't need any signs of art to it and art that doesn't need a specific place. I'm hoping that we can do things around Caracas, that we don't have to stay in the museums.

We want it to be a show about the future and therefore we want it to be a show about the past in a certain way. We want to honor Michael Stewart by saying that this is something that goes forward, that doesn't honor his memory by pretending that he's just a poor dead artist. To talk about how art might do something more and better than what the mean guys want it to do. It was kind of a nice moment in the seventies and eighties in New York City with graffiti art. In the late seventies you'd see entire painted trains that would come through. It was a great moment for the city to celebrate. And the city really did not. It hired killer dogs, it hired killer policemen and then drove all the graffiti artists inside the subways, with their black marking pens, which was quite ugly. They took a nice thing and completely screwed it up.

Maria Thereza and I will use the book that comes out of it, and the show itself, as a way to see if we can talk about politics in an art context without having to do political art necessarily, but just putting the two things together.

Oh, someone wants me to be in show in Australia. Coming up pretty soon. They sent me a list of the artists. Is there an artist in Canada named "Inuit artist?" [Everyone laughs.] It's a funny show. What they told me was that they had some Indian shaman from Guatemala whose name is Running Wolf or something like that…

BK: Oh no.

JD, I thought, I've got the wrong show. I'll get this list and read it into your tape. [Reads from a list which includes many internationally known artists.] Ah, it's funny, Inuit has a cousin named Cuban artist.

RH: If there was "Indian artist" we could just show up and say, "Yeah, we're in the show."

JD: Or you could put it on your resume. It's a couple of guys organizing this in Sydney. They have some Aboriginal elder or some Aboriginal group to do a welcoming ceremony tor the artists. It's a nice political business in Australia, because the Australians—not the Aborigines,

the “genuine” Australians—are so completely arrogant, worse than the Americans and Canadians, a million times worse. They’re sure that they’re buddies with the Aborigines. They’re sure of it. They’re sure that these are “our Aboriginals.” At the same time you don’t want white Australians not to try to make some gesture—but when they do it looks like women in hub skirts at the Honolulu airport welcoming you to Hawaii.

BK: I remember someone saying to a friend of mine, when they were in art school, “It’s good that you’re Native because you have so much to make art about.” [Everyone laughs,]

JD: A friend of mine from Portugal went to Mallorca to do a show and the guy from the local newspaper’s first question was, “Why are most artists gay?” [Everyone laughs.]. And now I know the answer: “Because gay people have so much to make art about.”

In ‘95, I was in New York with Gabriel Orozco and he was talking about the show I had just done at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery [*Ropa Vieja (Spring Collection)*]. He said it’s time for you to stop doing art about identity. It’s got nothing to do with anything anymore, the art world has gone past that, it’s the eighties. He’s the kind of guy that can say things and make you think that he’s right, so I thought he was right, for a few months. And then I realized that he was actually saying the words of some friends of his about my work and they don’t like me or my work anyway. So, it has nothing to do with anything. These same people say that to young artists: art that’s about identity, or art that has your own identity involved is no longer good art, if it ever was. Well, in the first place they’re all being fools to decide what is good art at this marvelous moment when you can make anything good art. You always could, but now you can see it.

When you look at Europe where I live, in Berlin, there’s a giant Turkish community, and half of the Turkish community is Kurdish and hates the other half and with perfectly good reason. All different Arab groups are fighting each other about who is the most fundamentalist Muslim and the Serbian Christians are fighting these other Christians, and soon. It’s partly a question of the hysteria of our moment, people feel they have to make some identity that is reality against someone else’s reality. For artists not to address that in Europe would be completely strange. It is the European problem, it is the African problem, it is the Arabic problem today. To ignore it because some critic doesn’t like that kind of work is really too strange. I know a lot of young artists who do the most beautiful, free things using their own identity and in extremely nice ways. That work speaks very much to our times, I think it’s the most contemporary work going on. It can look the least art—like, so they can break that gangsterism of the market and the museum in a lot of little ways. I’m now deciding that in the future, I might be able to investigate and address issues of identity—partly as part of this trick about the millennium—and get smarter in the process. I might do better art. I don’t have to do what I did in the eighties in New York. It’s silly for me to have been made nervous by a young punk like Gabriel Orozco.

BK: I know that we interrupted you talking about the project you’re doing here in Berlin with the fruit box. [See last issue.]

JD: Oh yeah. The way it’s displayed is the only thing that makes it worthwhile, because it’s a dumb little box. I’ll write a big long text about work in different ways. I have a lot of notes but I haven’t started writing yet because I want it to be extremely good, so that when you come in to the gallery the box will be there on top of a device where you can listen to a tape of this text in every European language and any other language that I can get it translated into. You can pick up earphones and hear it in Turkish, and Farsi, French, Italian, all sorts of

languages. It's translated and written and displayed in there too, so it's kind of like a card house, with large cards of the text. I imagine it to be a big structure with the box up on top.

I want the text to be the best writing I can do, completely engaging, so that you have no excuse not to stay there and read it or listen to it. Except no one does that in a gallery, including me. If there's a big long text piece, I skip it, because you don't expect that in a gallery. You want the visual thing, but especially now, people want the visual thing that they can get in two seconds. A five-second visual piece is too complex, I think. I want to celebrate the complexity of the actual box. I would like for there not to be a published text anywhere else for a certain amount of time, like 75 years or 75 seconds, some long period of time so that the box wouldn't have to be in service to the text or vice versa. In most of the work that I do, there's some sort of little text, and usually it's a text that has nothing to do with the piece, a text that just occupies the same space and tries to interrupt the piece and the piece then tries to interrupt the text at the same time, as a way to break the expectations that people have about art. I think we are at an evil time in art experience, because people want so much to know what they're going to see before they see it, so that they already are agreed to it. It's gangsterism. It's a complicity of gangsters. Then you only have to say the little things about it, like going to see the ballet *Swan Lake*, for the one-hundredth time, you say, "Oh, she's not quite as good at the *pas-de-deux* as the woman I saw in Paris."

What I tell my—I speak about my students as though I am a teacher or something and I only have these three lecture experiences. I call them all my students because we're all still friends, but they are not really my students. Some young artist friends who are still in art school is what I mean. My standard rap is chat there is a growing bunch of elite gangsters who are desperately trying to tell us what is important in art and it's more and more a tighter coalition between the collectors, the dealers, the museums and the critics. It's obvious because art is out of their control, or almost out of their control, so they try to control it more. When they let things in they try to let in only what works for their definition. They're getting meaner and meaner about it—more and more arrogant-because they can see that they're just about to crash.

Art history. It's a funny phenomenon, isn't it? Yet so many people want to jump into history. It's strange to see artists even younger than me—which I suppose is not so young, but I don't feel so old either—thinking about their past in some historical way instead of thinking about the future. Not strategically about the future but interestedly about the future. We're always pressured into thinking strategically now about art from the point of view of how to get famous.

I was in Istanbul for the Biennial and a friend's assistant hung out with us all the time. She was a very smart young woman but she said, as a kind of almost-nationalist, Turkish woman: "I don't see why we always have to speak English, I don't see why we can't speak in our own languages," which is an odd statement because it's not speaking that makes the difference, it's listening that makes the difference. You want to listen to everything that you can listen to. I wanted to say, "What do you know about the Kurdish language, isn't it a beautiful language?" Some thing to interrupt her narrative a little bit.

If there's only this little European art world, now it can't even support its littleness. If it tries to stay in control by allowing some of us in, which is what it's trying to do, that's what's happening with this Mafia of the art world. What we've always had is that the anthro's would go in to all parts of the world and come back and report to Europe what everyone was doing out there. Now things are changing, I think. For the past twenty years they've said, "You can speak if you speak what we know you will say, if you say what we have told you to say." It's the pow-wow syndrome. It's the fancy dance. It's Indians dancing the way we were taught to dance so we stay in a place that's not our place and not viable. Therefore we stay out of the world, a place that Europe tries to control.

RH: Allowing someone to let you in just confirms their authority.

JD: Yeah, exactly. A huge amount of knowledge has been lost and other knowledge has been hidden that is just excellent for us, for humanity. If we rely on the reports of the explorers, or if we challenge the reports of the explorers, then the explorers have us.

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