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Interview by Johannes Schlebrügge

Artist Portrait: Jimmie Durham

JIMMIE DURHAM: There is something about television that makes it seem extremely important. Then it goes away in a week, even less than a week. But every day you watch the news, you watch the whole television kit and it seems as though each day has a diarial situation, something that actually does not matter so much in life, even in political life, I think.

JOHANNES SCHLEEBRÜGGE: You react as artist. You have your tradition, your future, but you feel obliged to react.

JD: In a strange kind of way…

JS: It's another rhythm?

JD: Maybe it's another rhythm. If I think about actual quotidian situations, there has to be a longer rhythm to be intellectual about. Unless you are like Robert Musil, you can't think daily over about the daily things, at least I cannot. I have to think a longer period, my brain is slower or something, and I don't know how to engage intellectually on a daily basis about daily problems or daily situations, not problems, but situations.

JS: But you are sensible to political, moral atmospheres?

JD: Certainly to political atmospheres.

JS: In the seventies, in the United States?

JD: In the fifties, in the United States. That is when I started politics.

JS: When I read your autobiography, I was very surprised that you turned back in a certain moment to the United States from Geneva, changing completely…

JD: I was also surprised. I never expected to. I was quite happy in Geneva, and I was quite happy in Europe. I never thought to come back to the U.S., never at all, unless someone in my family dies, and I will go to the funeral. But I never thought to go back to the U.S., and I didn't exactly go back to the U.S. It was '73, and all Indians in the U.S. had to respond to a situation on an Indian reservation, Pine Ridge, and we didn't have a choice to not respond. So I went back to that reservation, I went immediately to Pine Ridge Reservation, I didn't go to the U.S. I think I went sort of against the U.S. And I stayed a long time, I stayed twelve years, thirteen, maybe fourteen years. But it's because I never had the money to leave, I didn't have a way to get out.

JS: You were very intensely involved in a political fight, or dialogue?

JD: We tried to make a dialogue; it didn't work. But we had an intense political fight, and we had

all Indians in that fight for our rights. And we never had that before in our history. We had never been Indians in our history before, we had never been Cherokee, Sioux, Apache, Comanche, Navajo, and we still are, but at that moment we became Indian people, we had something that Hollywood thinks that we always have. We never had it, but for a few years we had it. I am not the kind of person who likes to start things, I don't like to be anything like a political leader or something like that. If there is something going where I feel I should be involved and could be productive, then I want to. But I really don't want to be a professional politician. I really don't want to stay involved and try to make something happen.

JS: Organizing meetings, publishing a journal?

JD: I don't mind doing anything, I am willing to do anything.

JS: But you came back from this European culture, politics, the European horizon, getting back to this very defined situation, coming from an open student life.

JD: I was a student because that was the only way to stay in Geneva. And I've been an artist in the U.S., and I wanted to leave the U.S. and had a chance with Geneva. The only way I could get a permit to stay in Geneva was to be a student. So it was a privileged life because I got a free studio and the school was free and I didn't have to go to class. I never had to do anything at all. But I think it's a privilege to be an artist; it's a very privileged life. I never have to go to work.

JS: As artist, you are in an open situation. You have the possibility to be ambiguous and ironic. When you are politically active, I think, you have to be very well defined.

JD: You have to be monstrous in a certain way. You have to be single-minded, ruthless, kind of stupid. You have to say, "We are going towards these goals, and we can't be distracted." You have to be like linen or something; it's really horrible. It doesn't get you what you want, and everybody knows that it will not. But you can't sit still when it is time to act. That's all. But I'm not sure… I wish I were not an artist in the sense of identity; only, if I don't have that identity, I don't have a market. It's like a marketing strategy in a certain way. Your work, your ideas are not distributed, if the distributors don't have place to distribute them too. It means selling work for an artist. I wish I were always in some sort of intellectual present, where I was not defined in some way, where I was not an artist or not an Indian or not something that's built up for ulterior motives.

JS: You said once, "I am a universal Cherokee artist." That's a very good definition of the problem I have. What is a "universal Cherokee artist?" Is it not different from what it was in the seventies, another universality, another definition of being an artist?

JD: Maybe I am more willing to have no definition these days. I feel that I want to be confused in a certain way; I want to continually interrupt my own sentences, continually interrupt my own narratives and my own definitions—even in my work. I'm beginning to say this year that I probably will not make art in five years time. Maybe I will not be making art anymore. I was making art a long time. I don't want to be so heavy.

JS: Making art means to make objects or to participate in the art discourse?

JD: It may be making objects within the art system, or making anti-objects within the art system, within that sort of conceptual art, as they say.

JS: You prefer writing?

JD: No, I hate writing. I wish I would really stop writing.

JS: But you write a lot! I have the impression that you write with such ease, as surrounded by concepts and metaphors.

JD: I don't like the physicality of writing because I don't like to type. I only write this way (raises his hand), and in thirty minutes my finger hurts. So I'm writing quite a bit now, I'm writing a memoir of the year 1980. That is getting longer and longer, and the more I write, it gets longer. But I kind of feel I must write the history of that year, my own personal history what happened to me that year. There is nothing special that happened, but it's a year that is interesting for me enough that I think I have to put this down in a record of some sort. I have to put it down in the public, I have to put this to the public in some way. But I don't know why I feel that way. I'm suspicious about why I think that.

JS: You think about your public, about your reader when you write? You want to…

JD: … to engage, always to engage. And I think, I wouldn't make art if there wasn't any public engagement for it. I would not sit in the studio and paint or, if I got older and half blind, I would not go to a French garden and paint the flowers in the garden. I don't mean that's bad, I think Monet is the best artist, if there is such a thing, but it has nothing to do with what he did. It doesn't make him a better artist that he did that, or a worse artist. But I would not do it because I would be speaking to myself and to the gardener, and I don't need to speak to myself and to the gardener. I need to speak with other humans; I need a social engagement. And the social engagement is always political, that is the sense that I engage the actual situation. Not in the day-to-day, but in a war-to-war.

JS: It's not a simple engagement. It's an engagement full of double-senses, ironies and irritations. When I read your text in the *Jetztzeit* catalogue—I had to read the proofs, so I read it five or six times—I was never sure that I understood. The concepts were always shifting and changing their place. So I never saw your position precisely, it was like a moving star, and I had to move with it. It can engage, but it engages in a reflection, not in a position.

JD: Yes, I don't want a position. And I don't want to do any kind of thing, whether it's writing or art or singing or dancing or whatever, to where you could go into the library or into the gallery, look at the work and say, "Now I understand." I think it would be horrible. I want the opposite. I would like to make work that you would say, "I don't understand, I'm confused now." I not only wish that I am confused, I want you to be confused. Because that is engagement. If we say a certain thing, make a certain kind of statement that is understood, that is a statement, then we enter into something quite false, theoretically false. And we enter into belief which, I think, is the European sin. The original sin is belief. I think it is specifically a European history, it can just as well be, let's say, an Arabic history. But these two histories are quite close, aren't they?

JS: Religious belief, or religious and political belief?

JD: Religious and political. They don't separate very well. They continually go together. There is in European culture something that is really different from mine. It is the system of questioning. Questioning, I think, has a political history, and that political history is the inquisition, in one form or another. You are trying to get me to confess, and we are trying each other to confess, and then we do confess, then you have the opportunity to believe or not to believe. You must also confess in other words. And then we are co-confessors, and then we are gangsters against someone else.

JS: It's a relation of power, too. The one obliges the other to change his confession or to be punished.

JD: It's really quite heavy because it is as though the languages of Europe do not see a way out of belief. Linguistic belief is there, and the question-and-answer part is there, especially in the U.S. which, I think, is ur-European, the worst of Europe, in the sense of the most of Europe. Every place else, also in European languages, someone says some stupid version of the sentence: "I don't care about what is the answer, but asking the right question." And they say this very smugly as though it were a wise statement. I heard it over and over—it's so "banal." As though that were human discourse, where it was question and answer. And we see that it isn't. That it's only political history, it's only religious history, but it's only European, in other words, in a certain way. It's not the human way of interacting, even in Europe. The language forces us to imagine that it is, or to operate as though question and answer were the way that we operate.

JS: Art is an issue out of this system of power and belief?

JD: I think it is. I think that is the subversive part of art.

JS: Perhaps it's our European issue. Perhaps for you, in the U.S., the situation is different. I think, sometimes it's more terrifying in the U.S.

JD: Yes always. No, not always. A French friend of mine says that the U.S. is so far lucky that it doesn't periodically go crazy the way Europe does. It's a funny way to think. But, in fact, it's just because the U.S. is so constantly crazy that it spreads it out…

JS: Because I see you as a "universal Cherokee artist," it's very difficult for me to pronounce the word "Indian." But you arouse my curiosity when you say that the European linguistic system implies relations of power. Are there, in your language, other issues, other possibilities?

JD: I don't want to be comparative about it. I want my original language to be the language that I am trying to learn. I am trying to learn German now. I want that to be my original language, the moment where I am making the effort to learn something. There is always a different system with some other language that might be in my past. But I think there is something non-intellectual about being comparative. It is the non-intellectualness of confession. If I answer your question, then I confess that I think Cherokee language is more "X" than French language, more something, more better, more "subtle," more this or that. And whether or not I think that doesn't matter. Then it's only that you have convinced me to confess that thought and then we don't go anyway.

JS: I was right to hesitate.

JD: I paraphrase Foucault who said that power amasses power from every place. I think just as much stupidity amasses stupidity from every place. It is as though there is a stupidity machine, it is as though we wish to be stupid, and we try to make each other stupid.

JS: Stupidity as capital…

JD: Yes, something like that. In conversation especially, people try to not hear something new, to not say something new, but to take whatever is confusing or new or strange and bring it back onto some normal stupid level, the level of stupidity. We know that we do it in our families; that's why we leave our families, but we do it constantly, in every family. France makes France stupid by Francitude, you might say, and Europe makes Europe stupid, and humanity makes humanity stupid. At every level the stupid-machine gets us every day. That is the daily life, I think. Television is perfect for the stupid-machine; it's as though the stupid-machine invented television to propagate itself.

JS: It's a desire for identity?

JD: A desire to control fear, perhaps, existential fear. If we always say, "Oh, that doesn't matter, oh, you are exaggerating, oh, it's not so…" If we always say those things we are trying to comfort ourselves and hope that the day we tried to invent when we woke up is the day, that the familiar life that we pretend is there, actually is there. Then we wouldn't be so afraid and things would work out well. Me too…

JS: You make frightening objects, too…

JD: Because I don't approve of comfort. I want to be homeless, I want to be lost, but in some productive way, I hope. I don't know what productive might mean, but, at least, I don't want to stay with what I know.

JS: What about your sculptures and objects and the materials you use? What about the surrealist concept of *objet trouvé* and the fascination of the material? How do you find your objects in the outside world, where is the step or the flash point from where the outside world passes?

JD: My wish to be lost is only a wish. You can't easily become lost. You can't stand in the present or in the future because you do have all this stuff, even if it is just this stuff, at least you have it. And it's even if you could forget all of your language, even if you could forget your past, your body is there, you are made out of only your body. I have this basic, let's say, I have this kind of past, and I don't want it to dictate the next moment. So I try to look, I try to be confused and look, and then I see something, and it's almost always interesting what I see. I don't know what we might imagine to be conceptual against objects. And I think this is also a cultural problem that Europe including the U.S. has. You can easily see how—I am going off on a tangent now and then I'll come back to this other part. Because I don't type or use a computer, if I have a complaint or if I have some official request, and I write it and send it in to the authorities that I am complaining against or complaining about, everyone knows that this is not taken as seriously as a type-written thing, and that a type-written thing is not taken as seriously as a computer-written thing. My words can be perhaps sometimes more well constructed than someone else's

words, and my complaint can be more informative than someone else's complaint. But the physicality of this written thing against the physicality of the computer is a sign that I'm using the wrong objects, because it's objects, it's paper and graphite or paper and ink. And then we pretend that this great giant computer complex is not physical, we pretend that we know some words in some form that is not physical. That is a strange pretense, isn't it? Because we don't know any words, we don't know any sentences that are not physical. As I say it, I say it physically and you hear it physically, even if it is just sounds and throats and meat, it's completely physical meat. Inside you is other meat that's processing and… So when we in Europe or in New York say conceptual, we mean spiritual, I think, and I don't want to have to do with spirituality. I only want to have to do with what's here, intellectually. So then, to come back to how I might find something in the world, that could be a pretty word that I see in a magazine. But I see it in the magazine, I see the physicality of the pretty word. I don't think I like so much these *objets trouvés* because all of the objects are found. I think, I like objects that I don't have to pay for. I like free things better than expensive things. But if I see something that is really excellent but expensive, well, I try to find the money and buy it. But I think my method is more like a monkeys' method, I play and play and play, fidget with all of these excellent things, coats, whatever, rocks. And then I try to mix a little arrangements, and I try to show them to you: what about this, what about that? Then I look at your ideas and then I go on to the next piece with a little more information, a little more social engagement. So, I think the flash point is the social engagement because I am the kind of monkey that doesn't stop playing, I play with objects at every moment. The personal flash is like a continual flash, but the flash that makes a difference is when I can do it intellectually, which means with other people.

JS: To take an example: the role of the rocks and the stones in your work. You play with the name "Wittgenstein," you refer to etymologies, and you literally throw stones.

JD: I am looking always to engage some sort of European cultural history, like an interventionist place. Europe does like to be spiritual, it likes to imagine spirituality as the same as intellectuality. And when I walk around Europe, I see stones and stones and stones, I see Europe having made its nest of stone, not just cathedrals, but the directional stones telling you how to walk the streets and the side-walks. There is a building which says, "This is always here, this will always be here." And it's part of the state, and you must believe it because here it is it tells you. And here next to it is a stone place for you to walk every day, you can never not walk that way. The stone nest of Europe tells people how to physically be in the world, how to walk, where to walk, how to have your physicality, while pretending to be spiritual and nothing to do with physicality. It's quite a strange setup to me. So I say, "How can I engage that strange ideal?" I don't want to become that ideal, I might want to join it in a certain way if I wish to be in a certain society. I have to learn the language of that society, the vocabulary of that society. I could dress like an Indian and speak like an Indian, but it would just be to entertain someone. And I say, " Well, this is tweed, it's made of sheep hair, and that's made by a special culture." I can join that. I can wear it and at the same time not believe it. So I like walking around Paris, I like walking around Rome, but I don't believe them. And I don't want the Parisians and the Romans to believe them. I want to say, "Did you see that? What do you think of that?" So I say that I want to free the stone, I want to make it movable, and I want to make it do work instead of being a kind of monument that we become because the stone of Europe is a monument that makes us part of itself. So our bodies become stone and monumental, and our thoughts become stone and monumental in a certain kind of way.

JS: So you are the seducer, and we are the stony guests, corresponding to the title of your Wittgenstein book?

JD: Maybe the opposite, if I think of the Stony Guest. Here is the seducer, he is really a kind of criminal, it's more a rapist than a seducer, he is a braggart, he claims to be a seducer, he claims to be a great lover, like rapists like to claim. And there is a stone monument that suddenly says, " That's not true, you are just a braggart." Suddenly the stone starts moving and speaking, and the stone says, "I'm not just a monument, and I want to put up with this story that you are making a monument of. So, come with me down to hell!" I don't want to lead anyone to hell, but I would rather be the person who says, "Look, that stone just moved! It's not the monument you think it is." I would rather help it, nudge it to get out of my way, or something.

JS: I think of your portrait, the *Self-Portrait* from…

JD: … 1986, a long time ago.

JS: And of *Malinche*. They form a sort of terrible couple giving the impression of aggressiveness, terrible sadness, isolation and hopelessness. I never saw such an intricate complexity of emotions. Do you see them as a kind of couple, is it still important for you?

JD: It's important for me because it really is a great myth, I think. It's a true historical fact, about Cortez, the Spanish conquistador, and Malinche, the Indian woman. But it's also such a story that it becomes myth as soon as it's there. The mythical part that is important for us, for me is about what sort of self we have and what sort of other is the other. I like very much the writings of Michael Taussig about how we have others and how we have selves. It's a dynamic situation. You don't have a self until there is another and this other becomes jealous of you, and so you say, "This is a dangerous other; I have to make defenses," and then when you do you prove the other's point. Then you say about the other, "This is a very powerful other," and you become jealous. And you start and each one of us with each other makes a continual kind of vicious dance that could be loving at every moment and could be intellectual at any moment, but the stupidity machine takes over instead, so it doesn't happen. But I think we live in the age of discovery, we live in an age of where the New World was discovered, we haven't gotten out of that age yet. Hollywood is proof that we live in an age where the New World is the powerful myth. And it begins an idea of self and other within Europe but then becomes a dominant idea for humanity. We live in what the Whitney Museum is calling the American century—these last 100 years—but it's not. It was the New World Century, just like this one is going to still be the New World Century, in the sense of the idea that there was a New World and an Old World, just that strangeness. But then to say that we live in a time of discovery, it's still the time of colonization, that's what discovery is. And it's not true that we live in a time of post-colonialism, we live in a time of colonialism, that is the myth that is still the instructive myth to us, the dictatorial myth how we live our lives. I kind of feel those things constantly, I don't think of them constantly, but they are there constantly for me.

JS: Europe is the New World; I think it's the other way round. This New World which is still the leading myth is always repeating the same mechanisms of colonization and its denial. You see it everywhere when you leave Europe. Outside Europe I was very impressed by finding myself in a colonial situation. As European you are the colonizer, in Asia I moved like a colonizer. It's a physical perception that a European man takes up much more space around his heavy body. He is

moving really in a stony way.

JD: And the Ur-Europeans, the Americans, they take up so much space. Because they are triumphant they take up the huge oral space. You can tell two Americans in a crowded restaurant because they are decibels louder than anyone else. And they make up a big oral space around them. They take over the oral space…

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