Es geht um die Wurst, 1992

by Bart De Baere

There are many works by Jimmie Durham that stay with you. Take, for example, his Jesus figure, entitled *Es geht um die Wurst,* which was the central image of his contribution to *Documenta IX* in 1992, when the art scene represented a more limited world than that of today. The image was the centrepiece of an ensemble of works by Durham, installed on the ground floor of the Fridericianum, in the corner of an L-shaped wall that comprised part of the installation, and the back of which – across from Francis Bacon's last paintings – was activated. The entire installation faced outdoors. On one of the windowsills, a thin, upside-down animal horn and a periscope-like piece of gray PVC tubing were intertwined, facing or looking outdoors, under the title of *Schadenfreude*.

From here, a route snaked out towards the idyllic Aue, the small river with its little valley in a nearby park. Three in-between points established the connection. On the outside of the Fridericianum building was a somewhat larger piece of tubing, creating a new body for a badger hide that had been plucked from a roadside. Visitors who walked from there towards the park discovered two horizontal pieces of wood. One was sawn into a rectilinear beam, the kind of shape that we would nowadays identify with wood, and the other was a sturdy branch with a kink in it, so that it tended to point towards something. Both were painted a brotherly blue, the ends painted red. The third of these ‘fuelling stations’ can still be found in Kassel. It is made up of two rough cubes of red stone, from the same quarry that produced the material to build the ‘Red Palace’, which until World War II had stood next to the Fridericianum. Each of these cubes bore a copper plate. One stated that the stone was from the mountain, the other that the stone belonged to the palace. Finally, in the Aue itself, a second, larger periscope-like shape in gray PVC appeared to want to look back at the culture across the banks of the Aue, like a seal stretching its neck.

Each segment in its own right, and all of them together, speak about the impossibility of our culture. ‘From behind the windows that we build as shelter, we now look longingly at the nature that we want to protect ourselves from.’ This is what we can deduce from the accompanying text, which is titled *An Approach in Love and Fear*. Love and fear are the basic emotional polarities that we have in common with other animals – not love and hate. The underlying principle of this ensemble forms the key that connects two iconic images of Jimmy Durham that currently exist: the image, mostly circulating in the United States, of the reference artist for culturally diversified art, based on work he created in the 1980s in which he played a lucid game with the clichés and patterns of expectations that people have regarding 'American Indian art'. In contrast to this is the image based on his work over the last two decades, in Europe, which is often seen as a fundamental criticism of architecture as an emanation of the struggle for power.

There, in its secure corner of the Fridericianum, stood *Es geht um die Wurst*, looking out onto nature. It was quite different than Durham's second major work, located close by and entitled *Treff*, which marked an accent in the space and made the social activities around it its central focus. It was also different from the smaller works in the whole and the points along the

connection with the Aue, which are like moments of thought. The Jesus figure is a presence which people encountered and which itself opened a conversation.

Is that Jesus figure a Jesus? His outstretched left hand, bearing a wound, seems to confirm that, but the right hand presents us with a photograph of a mummified opossum. The figure, supported by a small stretcher laid on a metal potter's wheel, is a unity made up of contradicting moments. One of his legs ends in iron scrap, the other in a foot. His face has one side with a classic sculptural representation of a face, serene in expression, in a loving relationship with the wood from which it was made. The other half is the dark side of the moon, its only accent an eye of shining hematite, a lightly magnetic stone.

One can easily read the figure as an image of today's crumbled, disintegrating mankind, who no longer fits the classic Greek portrayal that Europe had so long taken as its reference point, a figure that is being torn apart by contrasting intensities of man-machine, form-chaos, emotion-control, life and death. But at the same time, how harmonious, this sculpture in which materials are happy to have one another as their continuation and their complement, in which things and ideas are aware of one another and consequently give one another energy; how endurable it is, in all of its vulnerability, awkwardness, openness and acceptance.

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