

Elements from the Actual World



View of the exhibition "Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World," 2017, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo Brian Forrest.

With irreverent humor, Jimmie Durham confronts the fraught history of the United States and his own complex relationship to native identity.

Hello! I'm Jimmie Durham. I want to explain a few basic things about myself: in 1986 I was 46 years old. As an artist I am confused about many things, but basically my health is good and I am willing and able to do a wide variety of jobs. I am actively seeking employment.¹

In 1986, the year before he began his voluntary exile from the United States, Jimmie Durham was invited to contribute to an exhibition of self-portraits at Kenkeleba House, a nonprofit space on New York's Lower East Side dedicated to exhibiting work by minority artists. His first instinct was to decline, since, at the time, he did not believe that his work had anything to do with self-portraiture. After weighing the issue, he came up with the idea of asking his partner, artist Maria Thereza Alves, to trace around his body onto canvas. Durham cut out the life-size figure and affixed a wooden armature behind it. He then carved a likeness of his face from cedar and attached it to the top of the canvas. He added adornments and anatomical details to the portrait—including hair and a colorful cedar dick—and painted inscriptions, such as the affable greeting above, all over the body.

Self-portrait (1986), which hangs on a wall, welcomes visitors to the exhibition «Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World,» currently at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Despite Durham's wide influence, evident in the

work of sculptors ranging from Abraham Cruzvillegas to Rachel Harrison to Pawel Althamer, this show is, remarkably, his first retrospective in North America. His neglect by American institutions, however, is only half the story. Durham, who has lived in Europe since 1994, has actively resisted such an exhibition in the country of his birth. He rejects the validity of its statehood and its right to claim him as its own. Thanks to Hammer curator Anne Ellegood's tenacity, after eight years of trying to persuade him, the artist, now in his seventies, finally acquiesced.

Durham was born in Washington, Arkansas, as a Wolf Clan Cherokee but considers himself stateless. Between 1836 and 1839, the United States forced members of the Cherokee Nation to leave their lands in Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, and Tennessee, and relocate west of the Mississippi. Around four thousand Cherokee died in the process, almost a quarter of the tribe. Given this grievous heritage, and the continued discrimination that indigenous peoples have suffered in the US since, another inscription on Self-portrait might strike viewers as surprising: I AM BASICALLY LIGHT-HEARTED.

Yet humor is evident throughout Durham's oeuvre, and one of the most striking things about «At the Center of the World» is just how funny the work is. The assemblages mixing natural elements like animal skulls and turquoise with salvaged furniture, the epistolary

drawings, the collages presenting quirkily captioned oddments from the studio, the off-kilter, quasi-shamanistic performances documented in videos, the frequently hilarious poems and whip-smart essays that Durham has produced over the past five decades all seem to bear out his assertion of cheerfulness. I HAVE 12 HOBBIES! 11 HOUSE PLANTS! boasts another caption on Self-portrait. An arrow points to a USELESS NIPPLE. Not included in the exhibition, Durham's Still Life with Spirit and Xitle (2007), an installation featuring a 1992 Chrysler Spirit crushed beneath a nine-ton boulder painted with a cartoon face, is, in one sense, an elaborate piece of slapstick comedy.

I am a full-blooded contemporary artist, of the sub-group (or clan) called sculptors. I am not an American Indian, nor have I ever seen or sworn loyalty to India. I am not a «Native American,» nor do I feel that «America» has any right to either name me or un-name me.²

On November 29, 1990, the federal government made it illegal for someone like Durham, who is not officially registered as Cherokee, to call himself an Indian artist. The Indian Arts and Crafts Board Act of 1990 made it punishable by «civil or criminal penalties up to a \$250,000 fine or a five-year prison term, or both»--to sell artworks or craft objects purporting to be «Indian» without official tribal registration.³ There are countless reasons why someone might not be able to register in this way, from having lost birth records to being adopted, but Durham, who was then living in Cuernavaca, Mexico, refused to register on principle. He explained in an open letter that, «authenticity is a racist concept which functions to keep us enclosed in 'our world' (in our place) for the comfort of a dominant society.»⁴

The place for native peoples, in the eyes of colonialist America, is far away, in the past, in fiction, or all three. Like the reservation system, created to keep Native Americans sequestered, the US culture industry--through movies, cartoons, fashion accessories, and sports mascots--insists on the separateness of native peoples from Euro-American society. As Rebecca Solnit writes, «Perhaps the conceptual reservation onto which Native Americans have been forced is called Art: like works of art, they are expected to exist either outside of time or



THERE'S PLENTY MORE WHERE THESE CAME FROM, 2008, objects from the artist's studio, acrylic paint, and ink on wood panel, 40 by 27 inches. Private collection, Mexico City. Courtesy kuri-manzutto, Mexico City.



Malinche, 1988-92, guava, pine branches, oak, snakeskin, polyester bra soaked in acrylic resin and painted gold, watercolor, cactus leaf, canvas, cotton cloth, metal, rope, feathers, plastic jewelry, glass eye, 70 by 23 by 35 inches. Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent. Photo Dirk Pauwels.

in the past tense of classics and masterpieces, to be on exhibit, to be public property, to be seen and not heard, to be about the spiritual rather than the political, and to embody qualities to which everyone can aspire.»⁵ Durham has frequently delivered keen parodies of the fetishization of Native American culture, often taking aim at the role of anthropological museums. In his installation *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian* (1985), among the collected artifacts bearing descriptive labels is a display of TYPES OF ARROWS --one TINY, one WAVY, and one SHORT + FAT. The installation also includes a pair of red panties decorated with shells, beads, and feathers, captioned: POCAHONTAS' UNDERWEAR.

The native princess has been a touchstone in Durham's practice. He made the sculpture now titled *Malinche* (1988-92) for a 1988 exhibition at Matts Gallery, London, where it represented Pocahontas, the young native woman who, in one version of her legend, purportedly saved her English captor from her father's war club, converted to Christianity, and was paraded in England as a «civilized savage.» Four years after the London exhibition, Durham renamed the sculpture for *La Malinche*, an indigenous woman who was also commanded by European colonizers, but who--unlike Pocahontas--is commonly considered a traitor to the Aztec empire. With her humiliating sagging bra and downcast head, *Malinche* cuts a sad and defeated figure, objectified and condemned by forces outside her control.

One might imagine that Durham's ethnicity would be, today, beyond question. His activist work with the American Indian Movement in the 1970s--when he served as director of the International Indian Treaty Council, fighting for recognition in the United Nations--is widely documented. But the field is evidently still riven with conflict, both internal and external, much of which centers on the question of where authority comes from for native people.⁶ In a recent *New York Times Magazine* article titled «Who Decides Who Counts as a Native American?», journalist Brooke Jarvis writes:

Contemporary Indian identity is refracted through a tangled accumulation of 18th- and 19th-century understandings of biology and race, as well as several centuries' worth of conflicting federal policies. The Constitution uses the word 'Indian' twice but never bothers to define it. A congressional survey in 1978

found that, in addition to the different requirements used by tribes and individual states, federal legislation defined Native Americans in at least 33 ways.⁷

As Durham professed in 1983, «One of the most terrible aspects of our situation today is that none of us feel that we are authentic. We do not feel that we are real Indians. . . . For the most part we just feel guilty, and try to measure up to the white man's definition of ourselves.»⁸

Art historian Richard Shiff has argued that Native Americans find themselves in a divided reality, a world of representation created by and for Euro-American colonial settlers which leaves no space for the contemporary existence of native peoples. He notes that while modernist art is generally accepted to be self-expressive or otherwise self-reflective, this possibility is hardly universal: «What of those artists for whom the self has somehow been lost or separated from its means of self-expression, its language of representation? What of those who have no language of which they consider themselves the true possessors?»⁹

During the course of his peripatetic life Durham has lived in the United States, Switzerland, Mexico, Germany, Sweden, Portugal, Belgium, France, and Italy. When he uses text in his work--which, if one includes the work's title, he does in almost every instance--he often does so in the language native to the country in which the work is made, which is not necessarily where it is shown. In some cases he writes in Cherokee, as in the four-part drawing *Zeke Proctor's Letter* (1989), where he transcribes a historical Cherokee text beside drawings and a contemporary, fictional letter in English. He tends not to offer translations. «What I want them to know is that they can't know that,»¹⁰ he has said, when asked how viewers without knowledge of Cherokee should approach such works.

I'm accused, constantly, about making art about my identity. I never have. I make art about the settler's identity when I make political art. It's not about my identity, it's about the Americans' identity.¹¹

According to Durham, in 1992, while installing an ex-

Self-portrait, 1986, canvas, cedar, acrylic paint, metal, synthetic hair, scrap fur, dyed chicken feathers, human rib bones, sheep bones, seashell, and thread, 78 by 30 by 9 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



hibition at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, he was told by a sassy young white woman that «the time of 'identity art' was over.»¹² It was just months before Durham would exhibit in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, a show now considered a landmark but widely derided at the time for its emphasis on identity politics. It was the first time he had heard the phrase «identity art.» He recalled in a later essay having had to «think for several days about what it might mean.» Durham reflected that, historically, European art had always been about «strengthening personal identity through the identity of the state.» Jesus, he notes, was always painted as white: «identity art to a very high degree.»¹³

Durham's own depiction of Christ, a sculpture made that same year and shown at Documenta IX, is a smiling carved figure sitting on a metal stand. It is based on Durham's friend, Julián Villaseñor, an indigenous potter from Cuernavaca. The figure appears partially burned, although the black substance caking its surface is actually mud mixed with glue and blood. Aside from the photograph of a dead possum that Jesus holds out, the sculpture is remarkable for its bright red erection, referred to in the work's title: *Jesus (Es geht um die Wurst)*, 1992, which translates as *Jesus (It's All About the Sausage)*.

Whose identity does this work represent? «When you make things, the result is always a kind of self-portrait,» Durham has said.¹⁴ The indigenous Villaseñor might be understood as a surrogate for the artist himself, although it would be a stretch to read the sculpture as a comparison of either man to Jesus. The red «sausage» is likely a reference to the character of the coyote in Native American mythology, a trickster figure who is driven by primal appetites and typically has an enlarged penis. Durham has said that it was the spirit of Coyote that gave him his real name, which he keeps secret.

The sculpture might also be interpreted as representing none of these figures--neither Durham nor Villaseñor nor Christ nor Coyote--but rather the viewer himself. Any perceived profanity in the work is only a reflection of the expectations or morality of the person looking at it; that is to say, the work appears transgressive only in relation to every prior image of Christ in the mind of the viewer.

This active conversation between the viewed and the viewer on the topic of identity becomes more pronounced in other works by Durham that include mir-



Jesus (Es geht um die Wurst), 1992, ash, acacia, guava, duct tape, dirt mixed with blood and white glue, acrylic paint, color photograph, cardboard, magnetite stones, and metal, 58 by 15 by 43 inches. Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp.

rors, video cameras, or lenses directed outward at the world. In *A Pole to Mark the Center of the World in Berlin* (2004), part of the series begun in 1994 that lends the Hammer retrospective a portion of its title, a hand mirror is attached to a hawthorn stick. Since Durham's figurative sculptures often consist of little more than modified wooden posts, it is natural in this context to think of the pole as a body. An associated text-painting on unstretched canvas (*Anti Flag*, 1992) suggests that the center of the world might be anywhere Durham is standing. The text in the work describes the sacred ahuehuate tree at Chalma in Mexico, the giant magnolia tree in Arkansas, and the yew tree in Ireland, as symbols of various centers, all equally valid.

Durham's main training in art took place in Europe--at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Geneva, from which he graduated in 1974. His identity as an artist was shaped by what was alien to it, and his oeuvre is littered with fond rejoinders to European artists from Joseph Beuys to Marcel Duchamp to Constantin Brancusi. Often it is hard to distinguish critique from tribute; *Homage to David Hammons* (1997), for instance, acknowledges Hammons with a urinal smashed by a rock, inevitably referencing Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) as well as Hammons's installation *Public Toilets* (1990).

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.¹⁵

Durham, who worked in theater before he turned to art in the 1960s, is endlessly dividing himself. While he addresses his viewers in direct terms, he also often steps outside of himself, interrupts himself, or makes ironic asides. His self-deprecation manifests in misspelled or carelessly applied script, usually in capital letters, which grants his work an air of guileless candor. A wood and PVC pipe construction titled *The Guardian* (free tickets), 1992, features a printed sign nailed to a rough-hewn figure's chest: GOOD AFTERNOON. WOULD YOU PLEASE PRETEND FOR A FEW MOMENTS THAT IT IS ACTUALLY ME, THE PIECE OF ART, THAT IS TALKING TO YOU? THANK YOU, YOU ARE VERY KIND. After a couple of paragraphs, Durham cuts in: SORRY FOLKS! THIS IS THE ARTIST JIMMIE DURHAM INTERRUPTING HERE! AS

SOON AS JANUS MENTIONED OPPOSITES I COULD SEE HE WAS GOING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION. Durham proposes that such a binary system is inherently flawed, that one idea should not automatically imply the existence of its antithesis. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE, he concludes. (BUT YOU STILL HAVE TO PAY.)

Slavoj Žižek has suggested that much comedy derives from precisely this self-estrangement. «A comic character is never fully identified with his role; he always retains the ability to observe himself from the outside: 'making fun of himself.'»¹⁶ This, says Žižek, paradoxically enables the actor playing a role to «overcom[e] the limits of representation,» closing the gap between himself and the part he plays. In *Self-portrait*, a few inches from his assertion that BASICALLY MY HEALTH IS GOOD another voice interjects: MR DURHAM HAS STATED THAT HE BELIEVES HE HAS AN ADDICTION TO ALCOHOL, NICOTINE, CAFFINE [sic], AND DOES NOT SLEEP WELL. Who is this second voice? Of course, it is also Durham, but it is Durham adopting the authoritarian tone of a doctor or a lawyer and, perhaps, by extension, the voice of white colonial authority that has long controlled and critiqued the bodies of people of color. Another note reads, faux-apologetically, MY SKIN IS NOT REALLY THIS DARK, BUT I AM SURE THAT MANY INDIANS HAVE COPPERY SKIN.

In case it is not clear by now, Durham's intermittent exile from himself is much more than merely a comedic device. It is his main weapon in his assault on narrative coherence. It is directly opposed to the unreflective, unquestioning voice of institutional power (satirized in works such as *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian*) that has conspired to exclude or ghettoize minority voices in the US's cultural discourse. And most significant of all, it makes us doubt almost everything--from the shells, feathers, fur, and bones to the colored (war-?) paint applied to half its wooden face that give *Self-portrait* a primitivist veneer of native authenticity.

Ellegood's exhibition concludes with a large abstract painting that incorporates collaged elements including Murano glass, woolen gloves, pieces from an airplane, mussel-shell buttons, lapis lazuli, alabaster, gold leaf, and an Egyptian wedding canopy, all obligingly labeled as if in verification of their authenticity. (I FOUND THIS GLASS ON THE OLD APPIAN WAY IN ROME or THIS STONE IS ALABASTRE [sic] FROM IRAN.) The work is titled *Various*

Elements from the Actual World (2009), and it compiles the formal and conceptual strategies of appropriation and capricious contextualization that Durham formulated in the 1980s and '90s. Just as in Self-portrait, language leads only to enclosure and limitation, leaving us to wonder what else these materials might be, or have been. In the upper left corner of the painting, a note reads:

WARNING

Words are used to conceal as often they are used to reveal.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW "Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World," at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, through May 7. The show will later appear at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, June 22-Oct. 8, 2017, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Nov. 3, 2017-Jan. 28, 2018, and the Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Canada, Mar. 23-Aug. 5, 2018.

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Zeke Proctor's Letter, 1989, acrylic paint, ink, and enamel spray paint on paper, 32 by 22 inches each. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Courtesy kuri-manzutto.

1. An inscription on Jimmie Durham's Self-portrait, 1986.
2. Durham quoted in Rebecca Solnit, "The Postmodern Old West," in *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2007, p. 35
3. The text of the law can be found on the website of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, part of the US Department of the Interior, doi.gov/iacb/act.
4. Durham quoted in Richard Shiff, "The Necessity of Jimmie Durham's Jokes," in *Art Journal* 51, no. 3, Fall 1992, p. 76.
5. Solnit, p. 33.
6. Jessica L. Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 48-49.
7. Brooke Jarvis, "Who Decides Who Counts as a Native American?," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 18, 2017, p. 56.
8. Durham, *Columbus Day: Poems, Drawings and Stories about American Indian Life and Death in the 1970s*, Albuquerque, West End Press, 1983, p. 84.
9. Shiff, p. 75.

10. Durham quoted in "Jimmie Durham in Conversation with Jeannette Ingberman," in *Jeannette Ingberman, Jimmie Durham: The Bishop's Moose and the Pinkerton Men*, New York, Exit Art, 1990, p. 31.
11. Durham, "Before the Law: Jimmie Durham in Conversation with Kasper König," *Wiels*, Brussels, Sept. 16 2011, quoted in Anne Ellegood, *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World*, Los Angeles, Hammer Museum and Delmonico Books, 2017, p. 26.
12. Durham, "Silly Crimes of the Academicians," in *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World*, p. 254.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Durham, "500 Words," as told to Allese Thomson, *artforum.com*, July 9, 2015.
15. Durham quoted in "Jimmie Durham Interviewed by Mark Gisbourne," *Art Monthly*, no. 173, February, 1994, p.9.
16. Slavoj Žižek, "The Christian-Hegelian Comedy," in Heike Munder and Felicity Lunn, eds., *When Humour Becomes Painful*, Zurich, JRP Ringier, 2005, p. 54