

**Bart De Baere
and Anders Kreuger**

**A Matter of Life and Death
and Singing**

This book is an outcome of M HKA's engagement for Jimmie Durham. Another outcome is his comprehensive retrospective in Antwerp, during almost six months in 2012, with a generous selection of his works—from the early period in Geneva around 1970 until the most recent years. Our project starts from Durham's relevance in Europe, which he prefers to think of as Eurasia and where he situates himself as "a homeless orphan." His recent work is often understood as a fundamental critique of architecture. This approach allows us to look back, with open eyes and minds, at what he actually proposed years ago. It also allows us to re-evaluate the appreciation of his work formulated in the late eighties, when the art world first started to become multipolar and culturally diverse.

Born in the U.S. in 1940 and based in Europe since 1994, Jimmie Durham is one of the most influential artists today and a prominent essayist. His art, his writing and his thinking are of crucial importance to many artists, curators and theoreticians, not least of the younger generation. He appeals to the broader audience for contemporary art, partly because he doesn't make "art about art" but wants his work to remain open to the world outside art. Durham is among the very few contemporary artists who have hands-on experience of political work. In the seventies he was one of the leaders of the American Indian Movement and the representative of the International Indian Treaty Council to the United Nations.

There are many reasons for M HKA to do this project. Durham has had an important following among art professionals and collectors in Flanders since his work was first shown here more than two decades ago, and he was based in Brussels after deciding to move to Europe permanently. The two curators of the retrospective have benefited from earlier contacts with him—particularly Bart De Baere, who has known Durham since 1990 when he was preparing Documenta IX in Kassel, but also Anders Kreuger, who first encountered him in 1999 when he was organizing an international symposium for artists and curators in Rotterdam. Moreover, the retrospective coincides with Durham's second participation in Documenta, twenty years after his installation *Approach in Love and Fear* in 1992.

But this is a very clear case of content overriding context. Durham's art is reason enough for our undertaking. It is meaningful and unpredictable, intellectually challenging and aesthetically thrilling. It articulates a world view and an experience of being-in-the world that are topical and complex, while at the same time being free of all unhelpful references to current affairs or works by other artists and thinkers. Durham is always ready to probe the fundamental convictions that make art a system, sometimes even a state of its own, and too often remain unchallenged.

The title for the retrospective and the book was first used for one of Durham's earliest solo exhibitions, at the Alternative Museum in New York in 1985. *A Matter of Life and Death and Singing* reflects Durham's seriousness and wit, his visual inventiveness and political passion, his articulate resistance to the oppression of the system, the state. All of which is part of an uncompromising commitment to what he calls "humanity's thinking process."²

In his work Durham uses all the components of what we know as visual art: the object, the image, the word, the gesture, their connections. Images and words may be nailed or glued or painted onto objects, which may be made "live" in front of an audience. Durham works with drawing,

² "Julie Talks with Jimmie Durham," in *Kitsch*. Trondheim: Trondheim Art Academy, 1996 (not paginated).

painting, video and, occasionally, photography. He does performances, makes installations, and creates his own museums, sometimes in collaboration with his partner, the artist Maria Thereza Alves. She is also usually behind the camera when still or moving images are needed. Yet much of Durham's work can be seen as "sculpture" in the widest sense: material appearances in space. The materials range from wood and stone and bone to plastic tubes and sheets of handwritten or printed text.

The exhibition and the book respect chronology but also acknowledge that Durham has followed several trajectories throughout his career. A linear mode of presentation wouldn't convey the meaningful coils and twists of his development, the variation of themes, the revisiting of ideas and images. We can't ignore this recursive aspect of Durham's oeuvre if we wish to understand and fully enjoy it. In the exhibition we have therefore endeavored to reconstruct "ensembles" of works that were made to be shown together, for example at Documenta IX or in seminal solo exhibitions such as *Architexture* at Galerie Micheline Szwajcer in Antwerp, 1994, *Stones at Home* at Christine König Galerie in Vienna, 2000, or *Le ragioni della leggerezza* at Galleria Franco Soffiantino in Turin, 2004.

"Ensembles" is also a keyword for the extensive preliminary research and documentation carried out by M HKA. The museum has collected visual and textual information about Durham's work and the exhibitions where it has been shown, and created connections between these various "items" and "events," as we call them in our world of informatics. As part of our research we have been setting up a substantial digital database, which now contains all of Durham's texts and information about more than 900 of his artworks. This is the beginning of an electronic catalogue raisonné of Jimmie Durham's oeuvre that M HKA will continue to maintain.

For this book we have commissioned three new essays—by Jimmie Durham himself, by Canadian curator and scholar Richard William Hill and by English critic and curator Guy Brett—and we have composed selected photographs of Durham's works (and some video stills) into an "image essay" in nine chapters. This has been done in close collaboration with the artist. The chapters represent areas of interest—his attention to the living body, his relation to stones, his notion of the center of the world—that may or may not be visually distinct. The chapters reflect ideas pursued and manifested in different materials and contexts, at different times. Many of the works illustrated in the book are shown in the exhibition. Most of the works shown in the exhibition are illustrated in the book.

In addition to this book, M HKA has initiated the publishing of a second collection of Durham's essays. The first collection, *A Certain Lack of Coherence*, appeared in 1993 and was edited by Jean Fisher. She is also editing the new volume, with a survey of the texts from his European years that have previously been published scattered in various catalogs, books and journals.

The retrospective at M HKA features more than 120 works from all of Durham's creative periods. This is a large project and we have benefited from the commitment and generosity of many different collaboration partners, so a number of thanks are due.

We thank all the lenders for the exhibition, which includes not only the artist himself, public institutions in Flanders, France, Portugal and Croatia and private collectors all over Europe and in the Americas but also the galleries Durham works with. kurimanzutto in Mexico City, who represent him, have been very helpful for our research and for helping us to put together the exhibition, and so have the others: Christine König Galerie in Vienna, Wien Lukatsch and Galerie Opdahl in Berlin, RAM radioartemobile in Rome, Galleria Franco Soffiantino in Turin, Galerie Michel Rein in Paris, Galerie Micheline Sz wajcer in Antwerp, Lumen Travo Gallery in Amsterdam, Sprovieri Gallery and Matt's Gallery in London, Módulo-Centro Difusor de Arte in Lisbon, Batagianni Gallery in Athens.

We also thank all those, apart from the dedicated members of staff at M HKA, who have helped us in various ways to organize the exhibition and produce the book. Jessica Horton has been immensely helpful in starting to collect and systematize data from the artist's personal archive. Jürgen Bock, Piet Coessens, Nathalie Ergino, Ilektra Kalaitzaki, Raina Lampkins-Fielder, Johannes Kahrs, Pedro Lapa, Friedrich Meschede, Dirk Snauwaert, Kai Vollmer and many others have helped us to find facts and people, objects and images and texts we needed to carry out this project. Our sincere thanks also go to all the photographers who have kindly allowed us to reproduce their images in this book.

Last, and most importantly, we thank Jimmie Durham himself and Maria Thereza Alves. It was—and therefore will remain—an excellent experience to work with them.

Antwerp, April 2012

Jimmie Durham

**Report to Molly Spotted Elk
and Josephine Baker**

It was minus fifty-nine degrees centigrades. and my boots bought especially for the trip were not good enough. Some guys looked at my feet, went away and came back with black felt boots my size. They were more like thick, stiff socks, with no soles of rubber or leather—nothing but the felt.

We all got into two vehicles and drove out into the forest for about thirty minutes to a spot where we were to have a picnic. My new felt boots kept my feet perfectly warm in the snow, which was formed into small sand-dune-like patterns, orange-gold on one side, turquoise-purple on the other; painted by the low-riding sun.

The guys got a fire started very quickly and began to roast chunks of horsemeat. The smell of the wood, meat, the forest itself, was pleasure close to the point of something I guess is ecstasy—except that a strong intake of breath made our noses want to freeze on the inside.

After the meal I borrowed a hand-axe to cut a thin birch sapling for a work I would do in the city of Yakutsk, where we were staying. I had to take off the leather mittens they'd given me, and wear only my wool gloves. The axe was sharp and the small tree fell with five quick chops. Frostbite on the tips of two fingers, still no feeling but tingling in one eighteen years later. The whole operation was not four minutes. Temperature that low is quickly dangerous.

The guys had put some vodka in the snow, and when we tried to have some with our meat it would not pour—frozen. A story was told about a Russian who gulped down a glass of syrupy frozen vodka and immediately died. Quiet laughter all around.

I was with Marketta Seppälä, a Finnish curator, and her husband Yrjö Haila, an environmental scientist who knows practically everything about birds. We took a walk in the forest, found an old Siberian Jay's nest that had fallen. It was tightly made of felt like my new boots. But the felt was made of lichen, spiderweb, small feathers. Sixty below zero and the Siberian Jay does not migrate, we learned.

The people of the semi-autonomous Republic of Yakutia are the Evenks, the Evens and the Yakuts themselves, who are Turkoman and arrived in horse camps only about a thousand years ago. Traditionally these three groups have not got along well with each other in this very hard, vast and beautiful country. In the winter it gets sixty below. In the summer it can get above forty-five and swarming with clouds of biting flies and mosquitos.

It is Taiga forest delicately sitting on permafrost. At times, for different reasons, a small area of permafrost melts and all the trees collapse into the mud. When it re-freezes into a field cleared in the forest it becomes a perfect settlement for a group of Yakuts, with their horses.

When I was born my mother had no milk—too many children already, I suppose. I could not tolerate the milk of cows and goats, but people said that horses' milk would do the trick. In Yakutia they make an alcoholic drink, kumiss, from horses' milk. We were served boiled horse noses every day, and breakfast was my favourite: raw liver that melts in your mouth frozen and sliced very thin—a fresh liver sorbet. (It was stored on the front porch, near where water was stored as blocks of ice.) The stout little horses had no barns nor shelter, but lived outside, as did the dogs.

The country is more than five times the size of France with no railroad. So no Gulags.

The people we met, from all three groups, were all scientists, specializing in the various fields of earth sciences and those meteorological. They have their own Academy of



(a)

Sciences, but must tolerate also an outpost of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The Yakutians are expected to join the Russian Academy, and do. Though invited, the Russians refuse the Yakutian Academy.

They had not thought one way or another about their older tradition and ways. They had not been defeated in heroic rebellions. They had not, as we have done, squandered fortunes in law cases in courts set up against them, nor wasted their young in education to become lawyers themselves in a legal system established against them. They became scientists. Studied and defended themselves and their land thereby. For wanting some freedom from Moscow, and for daring to become scientists, they have been constantly persecuted, imprisoned.

Yet—astounding—yet for the most part they still agree with the idea of some sort communism. They, as Siberians—so many groups, tribes, cultures, histories—would like to see the continuation of a union of Soviet states. But without Russian dominance. For them the Russians are like the Americans to us: loud, arrogant, infantile and completely destructive.

The ways that they have found to live in this situation: when I returned to Brussels where we had moved I thought that I had met wise people for the first time in my life.

* * *

Yakutia had actually called to me from the sky. Maria Thereza Alves and I had moved to Europe in 1994 after living in Mexico for eight years. (She is from Brazil, but did not want to live there.)

She went directly to Europe as we left but I had to go to Tokyo for a project with Fram Kitagawa. Afterwards he got me a first-class ticket on Japan Airlines from Tokyo to Dublin, where I had a residency in the Irish Museum of Modern Art. In the very front of the plane I had clear daylight all the way across the Eurasian continent (until, I guess, about the time we crossed over northern Germany into the Belgian territories.) I listened for hours and hours, drinking whiskey, to Beethoven's sixth symphony.

Crossing the Siberian northern forest was endless. I really did not have an idea of it before. Many hours into the flight I saw a river below. Bigger, it looked, than the Amazon, snaking through a thick green forest. I had no idea of such a river in Eurasia. Nor of such a forest.

In Brussels I looked at books about Siberia, and a globe. (If there were personal computers in the nineties we did not know it.) I saw an illustration of an animal called a "raccoon dog." It resembles a North American raccoon but is also different, just as the people I later met looked and acted like my people but different. I found the river on the globe. It is the Lena River. Flows just north of Lake Baikal in Irkutsk through all of Yakutia into the Arctic ocean, with a huge delta in the Tundra. (Taiga is permafrost forest and Tundra has more snow, less vegetation.)

I said to Maria Thereza that I had to go there. I had to see that river, wanted to see a raccoon dog. A few weeks later I received a letter from Marketta Seppälä inviting me to accompany her and Yrjö there. We celebrated the change from '94 to '95 in Yakutsk. I made a pole to mark the center of the world in Yakutsk from a small piece of one-way mirror glass I'd found on the street in Brussels, tied by steel cable to the pole I'd cut in the forest.

I had been watching television in my hotel room, as all the Yakuts did constantly. They watched an American show called *Baywatch*, brought to them by Coca-Cola, a drink they did not know.

I left some coins and a small object by the tree that guards the entrance of the town, which was full of chewing gum, cigarettes, handkerchiefs, T-shirts, coins and bills, small objects, bottles of water and soft-drinks.

The television in my room showed an animated cartoon with a caped hero called *Mighty Mouse*. There was an innocent young country mouse girl who had been hypnotized by a cat. The next day I lay in the snow in the position of the hypnotized mouse and Yrjö took a photo.

Here is a sort of footnote: Ilya Kabakov was assigned to northern Alaska for the same project, *Ultima Thule*. Instead of going there he stayed warm in New York and exchanged letters with Pavel Pepperstein about an old woman they knew in Moscow who claimed she had been to Alaska.

* * *

Maria Thereza gave me a paperback of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, by José Saramago. I had not heard of him before, but the story is set in Lisboa, for which I have a special love. It is such a good book that I wrote to many friends advising them to read it.

The first project after Dublin was a show about architecture that I did with Galerie Micheline Szwajcer in Antwerp. I tried to make a little de-construction of the European tradition of complicity of the most criminal sort between architecture and art.

Mário Teixeira da Silva, of Módulo Gallery in Lisboa came to see it and asked if I could come there and do a show. He arranged an artist studio where Maria Thereza and I could live and work. It was in a park in an old part of town, with drug addicts and their dogs, as well as a very good cheap restaurant with outdoor tables.

Businessmen came there to eat and so did the druggies' dogs, who were unfailingly courteous about their begging of table scraps. I was completely charmed by the groups of businessmen who would share a large bowl of cherries for dessert. Are there groups of businessmen of any other nationality who will order a bowl of cherries?

Saramago's book is infinitely quotable. I wrote to him asking if I could use passages in my artwork. He agreed and I spent the next four weeks walking around Lisboa with the ghost of Ricardo Reis.

In our neighbourhood there was much trash, ordinary litter and debris from old buildings. I have always thought that some of the most interesting shapes come from broken ceramic toilet bowls and such like. They are strange bones from impossible beasts. But I have had no interest using these shards to show that fact. I try not to make clever art of that type.

On the beaches I gathered stones and parts of seashells, plastic objects. I bought mysterious tools and material in hardware stores. I found on the street an X-ray photo of a broken ankle. With all of these things I looked for combinations that could act on their own, speak on their own, and not depend upon past histories nor resemblances.

Each sculpture was given a quotation from *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. Reis was one of the pseudonyms of Fernando Pessoa. A fictional author, but by Saramago's logic Reis himself does not know that. When Pessoa dies Reis returns from Brazil to Lisboa, to live nine more months.



(b)



(c)



(e)



(d)

Just as, according to Saramago, we live nine months before we are born, we live nine months after we die. Even if we were not very real to begin with.

This takes place in Lisboa just as the foul-smelling reign of the dictator Salazar begins.

* * *

I am a fool in my love of material of any sort. It must be obviously true to observers of the works. That is neither the beginning nor the end—not the point—of my work and not the method.

My ridiculous body is sufficient evidence that I am of the natural world and therefore have no need to try to join it. I do walk around appreciating it, however. My mind, not always ridiculous, is proof enough that I am of the human (and other life-forms) social world, so I have no need to try to join that either.

It is something else that we do: constant acts of construction, perhaps. I might say that one or another sculpture by me is my direct response to Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. But few acts are direct responses. I read the book socially. It looks as though reading books were private—almost anti-social. Even if you are the very first person to read the book, it is made, and you are reading it—as an editor, maybe, to prepare for a large audience—you are reading it socially. No matter what the writer claims, she did not write it for herself, nor exclusively for you. It is written and read publicly, socially.

Moreover, I have said in several lectures that I make my work for the smartest people. I do not know them, and it has nothing to do with formal education or social standing. They can be anywhere. If I make my work comfortably, for people like me, it is like friendly bar-talk. Fun, important for friendship, ultimately superficial and useless to the world. I have noticed that if an artist thinks she is smart (of course I have a specific person in mind writing this), the work will have the stupid signs of intelligence and will talk down to us lesser folk. Might impress some people for some time... When I see bad art it is almost always bad not because of carelessness or lack of talent but because of the smugness of the artist congratulating herself on how smart she is. The bad taste lasts a long time! Something good gives courage and energy. A bad film can depress me for days.

Here is something frustrating: I love material and I love to work. I can be happy and intent a long time working. Work is generative; makes more work. But at the end I will not like the pieces I've made. They will have not enough thought in them. Or worse, not good thought. If I think first, plan the piece mentally only, they often bore me once they are made. Too much of a gesture instead of a work.

So many poets have written that poetry "comes" to them. Happily, that happens to me with sculptures also. In 1995 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev invited me to participate in a group event to celebrate the founding of Rome. For no reason I know about I decided to make a large interesting pile of trash.

Carolyn needed a maquette for the catalog (or a drawing, which I can seldom do). I had no studio in Brussels but Maria Thereza had rented a space which I was able to borrow. The result is a miniature pile of interesting garbage that pleased me much. Carolyn still has it. The actual trash pile I made in Rome was so interesting that we needed a security guard to keep local people from taking parts they needed.

(1)

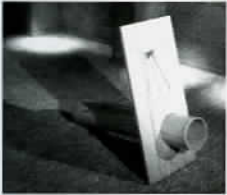


(2)



The year before that Carolyn and Iwona Blazwick had curated an exhibition in Antwerp by a very long title that begins with the words "On taking a normal situation..." That show was for me the beginning of my continuing investigation of European traditions. A text with some drawings was the main work but there was an almost-large sculptural element made of the length of PVC pipe, a giant door with the doorknob on the edge, and an axe.

Both works were manifestations of the ur-primitive character Enkiddu from the Gilgamesh epic, which describes in the first written words the story of the first city—of civilization. In New York I had earlier used Shakespeare's Caliban as a similar alter ego to investigate the colonization of the Americas.



(h)

It has been more than a year since I began thinking about writing for this book. It seemed a good idea to more or less describe, however briefly, everything I have done since returning to Europe in '94.

It is not possible even to list the shows. I decided early on, perhaps partly by the expedient of not saying no, to do anything anyone asked. I have done that ever since. It has so far been an excellently beautiful time, with shows, teaching, conferences and public events, writing. Constantly busy, and moving from city to city.

Those two years in Brussels when I had no money, no studio—it is not a brag that I worked on three or four projects at the same time, all the time. I saw it as a privilege.

We moved then to Marseille and stayed two years, would've stayed longer but was invited to Berlin through a DAAD grant, and ended up staying eight years there before moving to Venice to teach, to Alexander Calder's studio in France, and finally, after being luxuriously homeless for almost two years, to Rome.

But I'm getting ahead of my account, and will return to the time in Brussels.

In Mexico Maria Thereza and I began to collaborate on video works: In New York in the early eighties I did many performances, at the La Mama Theater, Franklin Furnace, Dance Theater Workshop, Exit Art and other places. It proved impossible to get them recorded. If you do not speak to the camera, the camera ignores you.

Maria Thereza had a camera and we hit upon the idea of me performing only for it. Never having had a television I naively thought that we might then sell our performance videos to television.

We first made two videos for the future show at Galerie Micheline Szwajcer: *The Man Who Had a Beautiful House*, and *The East London Coelacanth* (more or less in connection to a book I had made of the same title with Book Works in London, more or less in connection with a show at the ICA).

We like the process, and we like collaborating. We had done several performances together, in Mexico, Spain, London and Ghent. But collaboration is difficult for us unless there is some clear way for each to contribute. With Maria Thereza directing and operating the camera and me acting silly in front of it, clarity of work is easy.

In Brussels, still in '95, Lex ter Braak invited me to Middelburg in the Netherlands, soon after I'd completed a show at l'Ancienne Poste in Calais. I made one very long sculpture that encircled the Middelburg space, wrote a poem and



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(j)

made a video—our first in Europe, with Lex as bell-ringing assistant. In the video a stone attempts to answer the telephone. The telephone is on the ground, looking very similar to Joseph Beuys's "earth telephone." This, I'm sorry to confess, is simply one of those coincidences that so often happen. I was not commenting on Beuys's telephone. At that time I did not know of it.

A month or so later we were invited to Lille specifically to make videos. I suppose we stayed four or six weeks there, thinking only of videos. We lived and worked at M.A.J.T., and our neighbour had a cat named Jimmy, who became my assistant.

* * *

People seemed to like the work I did in Middelburg, but not many people liked the Calais show. How can I defend it? Of course I cannot; first because it is now many years in the past and none of you will have seen it. Secondly, if people do not like your work there is no possible defence.

I remember a time in the eighties when David Hammons showed his bust of Jesse Jackson as a blue-eyed white guy, entitled *How Do You Like Me Now?*, in Washington D.C. Local black people took offense, deciding that Hammons was doing bad against Jackson. He remained so beautifully silent!

For my part, it may seem like vanity that I still worry about the reception of a work so long ago. I see it as a duty to myself. Art, as any communication, happens socially, not individually. Not like a painting by Pablo Picasso being "so far ahead of its time" that people do not catch on.

By what system would I not want to worry, not take myself seriously as a social constructor? As I see it, only the system wherein we are all sitting drinking in the bar, saying not much more than that we are all OK, with maybe a ghost story once in a while to wake us up.

If something does not work I need to know why, and I do not automatically blame my talent or vocabulary. I tend instead to try to inspect the circumstances and the audience. Very often I conclude that the environment, the silly little bar, is not conducive to either me being sufficiently intelligent nor the friends being sufficiently receptive to something outside the comfortable bar-talk.

I hardly exist without you. It seems, then, that I must have your better attention.

This happens so often coming from the U.S. Some famous guy gets on TV or writes an essay in *Time Magazine*: "Movies (or art, or theatre or books) are for entertainment. If it's not entertaining, it's useless." Everyone nods their heads at his wisdom. Stupid fool. What does it even mean? Why does he need to be "entertained"? Why does he demand a lap dance from us? What does he want me to want to happen with him?

* * *

Leaving Mexico, moving to Belgium, I had to quit a five-pack-a-day cigarette addiction, and was in a continuous flux of weird states of being, as Maria Thereza can attest to. Once we were both down to the rocks and bones and spent the day in the large, almost-wild park in Brussels. As I walked among the trees and grass, saw the butterflies and heard the cicadas, like the Greek guy Antaios; my strength



(l)

(m)

began to return. I ate all the herbs I could find. I breathed. It is not romanticism, friends, not sentimental. Simple biology, which for us includes mentality.

I knew the politics—never lost the consciousness that I was in a park in a European city. I ate the fresh blossoms hanging from the Linden trees. What a marvelous partner for Europeans, Linden trees! Much medicine is made from them. I've written poems about them, made art with their wood and about them.

The show in Calais was connected to a show in Rheims, where traditionally French kings were crowned, at an old hospital.

In the park in Brussels I saw how I was healed, and began to think about the "natural" world in connection with the upcoming show in Rheims.

The show in Calais was about machinery, because the lace-making machines there are the ancestors of computers (They operate by a system of "punch cards," with patterned holes which instruct the machine: "Yes"/"Not Yes.") The show in Rheims would be about how trees assisted the Enlightenment. Traditionally Linden wood has been used both as charcoal sticks for drawing and as wood blocks for making woodcuts.

The scientist Vesalius, blessed be his name, looked at cadavers he dissected and drew what he saw. (In this instance of drawing what he saw he is like my main man, Albrecht Dürer.) Guts, livers, pancreases, hearts, oesophagi, and other organs too numerous to mention. He then made woodcut prints of these observations and published them, instead of each physician or surgeon developing theories based on fantasy instead of observation—no more "vapors," no more "wandering" uteri. He drew and published the reality for the first time. The wood used for the woodcut block was Linden.

Before the Rheims show I had spent an eventful week in the Czech Republic, in Plasy close to Pilsen, where the best beer in the world is made. With other artists from all over, I lived in an old monastery where the monks had made secret concoctions from Linden ash, for medicine.

At some point the monastery was taken over by Metternich, whose descendants, Nazis all, lived there until after the Second World War.

I wanted to make a Pole to Mark the Center of the World at Plasy, so I went into the forest and cut a small Linden sapling. I stripped off the bark, rolled it up and took it home to Brussels, to use in the Rheims show. The show had the title *The Anatomy Lesson*.

How strangely cylindrical we all are. The bark of a small willow tree can be removed as a hollow cylinder, and I bet if I had been careful I could've done that with my Linden sapling. Like skinning a snake. Except that we fork at the end (I cannot wear a pant, but must have a pair of them sewn together. We are just as cylindrical as a tree, with fewer branches...) we are all similar.

The show in Rheims was an old hospital full of sleeves, arms, metaphorical cylinders. Full of PVC pipes and plumbing. Full of weird physicality. I tried to make it look a little bit as though some alien being had tried to sort things into a kind of order after a bombing.

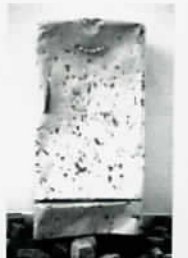
The space is so big that there was a great luxury to play. It is there that I found an old refrigerator and threw cobblestones at it every morning for about ten days, to change its shape.

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Maria Thereza and I had found ourselves living in Belgium more or less by accident. There were many friends there, and we lived in St. Gilles where there were good Portuguese restaurants. But we were unable to get permits to stay. In those days the police in St. Gilles were really crooked and racist. This was not noticed, of course, by the Belgians.

In the middle of the year '96 we moved to Marseille. Walking home at night from a restaurant on our first day there we noticed a strange smell in the air—vaguely familiar but I could not identify it. As we got closer to home the smell became stronger. Finally, "Teargas!" I said. There had been a conference of Jean-Marie Le Pen's party and the police had used teargas to disperse students who demonstrated against the conference.

Leaving Belgium I had just done a show in Lund, Sweden, at Anders Tornberg Gallery, living for a month in Anders's house and using the gallery as a studio. I met Gertrud Sandqvist there, who took me to see the new Art Academy in Malmö that she was opening. I began teaching there the next year.

More or less at the same time Ulli Lindmayr invited me to do something in the house that Wittgenstein had designed and built for his sister in Vienna. As an architect Wittgenstein was a disciple of Adolf Loos, only more severe, of course. The house is beautiful, every detail controlled so much that it gives an impression like that of a drunken man pretending to be sober. A crazy house pretending to be not crazy.

It seemed a perfect place to continue the attack on architecture I'd started with the show at Galerie Micheline Szwaјcer. There was a small book, published only in German, that I saw as part of the project. I had done a similar thing at a show in Exit Art in New York in 1989, with a book as part of the exhibit.

Only now, however, preparing for this retrospective, do I realize that I have never made a separation between writing and making sculptures. They maybe do not come from the same impulses and do not have the same purposes. Yet for me they do not bother each other.

In 1997 Sweden invented a new organization for residencies for artists and I was invited to Stockholm from Marseille. Maria Thereza came and we stayed for three months of warm, sunny weather and light far into the night. There was room and time enough to concentrate and make more videos.

In Marseille our studios were on the fifth floor of a high old cigarette factory. It became increasingly difficult for me to climb up. I decided that it was simply because the time of my life was expiring.

Then I broke my navel. It is too deep, having been cut wrong when I was born, so that the stomach muscle is weak around it. I developed a painful hernia—a tear in the muscle. To keep it from becoming worse I put a glass marble in my navel with a lot of padding and taped it up. That is the way I worked in Stockholm.

Afterwards I returned to Antwerp to do a second show with Micheline Szwaјcer and had too much pain. A doctor there agreed to do the necessary surgery but found that I also had pulmonary pneumonia. That is why I could not easily climb the stairs in Marseille.

(q)



(s)



(r)



Now I will switch tracks: my method of living, not working. The world loves me. It is really as though there is an entity that I think of as the world. Everything altogether, in other words. It is like a big, stupid, friendly dog that loves me. It has always been true that if I am out, in a desert, for example, and am in need of a piece of string I need only start looking and will soon be provided with string. If the first piece of string I find in the desert is not quite right I need only say "Thank you, but not quite right," and continue looking. More string will arrive.

Maria Thereza is witness that this always works. You might well ask, then, why I have always been so poor; why can't I just say that I need money and look for it? Well, in fact I can and do, but I have not known how to say I need an excess of money, anymore than I might say I need much more string than I have things that want to be tied.

Because of that friendship I have with the world I am extremely sensitive to it. I am not the only person who hears voices, feels spirit in stone and wood. (Please stay with me, this really is leading somewhere.)

Isabel Carlos invited me to participate in her Sydney Biennale. I contacted Cheryl Buchanan, an aboriginal friend I had met thirty years earlier when she came out to our treaty conference in South Dakota in '74. She agreed to be my guide and sponsor. Partly because of the incredible troubles she has suffered, but mainly because of some hypersensitivity to the land itself, I was overly emotional for the entire month in Sydney. A strong sadness came over me, difficult to control.

Sometimes, in my case like so many others, because of history, one finds oneself in situations where some activism is necessary. I find myself once again in one of these situations. In this instance the activism amounts to publicly speaking out, and writing.

When I lived in Geneva a Mapuche Indian from Chile and an Aymara from Bolivia and I started an organization for international support for Indians of the Americas. I also had close friends in various African liberation organizations. I knew Kurds and Roma.

Returning to the U.S. I was assigned to work at the United Nations in New York. Practically every week I received letters from people in prison asking help. From Ainu prisoners in Japan, Maoris, Aborigines, Sami and Inuit from Greenland. I could not help, and we needed to concentrate on the specifics of European colonization in the Americas to be of any effect at all, so I ignored the letters.

A couple of years ago I was invited to make a permanent new work as part of the first Sami courthouse in Norway, in the town of Tana on the Tana River. I stayed a month making it, again perfect sunny warm weather, but the sun never once went down. I spoke with many people, again learned much that I'd not before thought of. Again saw how racism had made people (local Norwegians) dirty and stupid, proud and arrogant.

The opening of the new courthouse, and of my work, was attended by the king and queen of Norway, who received a strong lecture from the Sami judge. One is embarrassed in the presence of people who have something wrong with them: incontinence, extreme neuroses, etc. I am always embarrassed around people who agree to be subject to a king or queen.

(1)



You see that events and experiences have made me consider the world-wide situation of "Indigenous Peoples." On every continent we are oppressed, and at best at the whims and mercy of the nations founded against us. What, might I say, refusing romanticism, makes us different? We are stateless peoples. Stateless with no wish, no possibility to make our own nation-states.

This is where I live and work. Not in Rome or Berlin; in Eurasia at a time of growing national xenophobia.

People often ask if there are possibilities to combine activism and art. I think they want my works to carry political slogans... As I say in schools, art is an intellectual endeavor. Surely we can trust intellect?

Teaching is also part of my art practice, not separate. Besides teaching in Malmö for nine years I also did special workshops and tutoring before that time (and during that time) at schools in the Netherlands, England and Denmark.

Living poor in Mexico I would often go for a week or two of lectures and studio visits to art schools in the U.S. I would take along five or ten pastel drawings and sell them to other teachers for one hundred dollars each to augment the teaching fees, and saw this also as part of the social side of art practice.

Angela Vettese invited me to live and teach in Venice for six months.

In almost all of these situations I've made permanent friends. Talented young artists whom I had nothing to teach and whom I have been consistently unable to help, with residencies, shows or grants. I do not know why I am so un-influential. There is nothing to impart in teaching. No actual instruction, except of course the practical things like how to use a certain tool. In that case the instruction goes both ways, because the young artists know computer stuff and other mysteries.

I would always rather participate in a group show than have a solo show. The talk with other artists is good for me. Teaching is part of that phenomenon. The social discourse about art is part of the practice of art.

SUPPLEMENT A

Talking about how things happened in the past is always about choosing some version of facts and memories. There is no completed version.

I am also never sure of the motives; why do interviewers ask such questions as, "How did you begin to make art?" What answer would provide information about what?

In about 1964 I met a most excellent guy named Tommy Geist, on some construction site where we both were working. He was a descendant of those thousands of Germans who had immigrated to Texas in the last half of the nineteenth century. Politically and religiously conservative, these people were not especially racist, as were the earlier English and Irish immigrants. Tommy took pride in the stereotype of the hard-working, clever German peasant. He could do anything that involved hands and brains working together: he made his own guns, bows and arrows, hunting knives and machines of different kinds. He and I were both woodcarvers.

I had learned loyalty to the Case brand of pocket knives from my father and uncles. Tommy taught me that Hoffritz made better knives.

For a while he stayed in my apartment in Austin. I had been making art-like things for a couple of years. Not just carving but paintings (I had not yet heard that artists used special paints made for them—I used different colors of house paint) and assemblages. I did not know the word “assemblage,” of course, I was just gluing and nailing things together.

In those days I assumed that I also could do anything. I worked as a mechanic at the power plant of the university, but was making some jewelry and stuff at night. A couple, John and Trulah, asked if I could make their wedding rings. I said, “Of course.” Gold, I remember, was thirty-five dollars an ounce. I bought some and took a night class in lost-wax casting at the student union. (I was not a student but they did not care.) Someone asked if I could mat and frame a picture they had bought. “Of course,” I said—not even knowing what it meant exactly. Tommy gave me a wood-carving gouge and mallet. It was so amazing! The way it allowed me to shape large pieces of wood!

Through friends I had met a rich Spanish man, José Rubi, and his wife, Rebecca. She asked if I would make a sculpture of a bull for his birthday. With my new gouge I made it from oak, with iron legs that were pieces of re-enforcing bars from a construction site. José did not like the piece, because it did not look like the bulls in Spanish bullfight posters. Rebecca paid me six hundred dollars anyway—very much money.

In those days I had a girlfriend who was a graduate student in theater. (I had earlier been active in community-based theater.) We often went together to concerts and public events at the university and met once an exchange couple from Geneva.

I saw that I could live by making art, so I sold my car and got a Hapag Lloyd freight ship in New Orleans and made port some weeks later in Le Havre. It was not possible to stay in Geneva without a visa, so Maurice Graber, the friend whom I'd met in Austin and with whom I was staying, got me enrolled as a student in the École des Beaux Arts, therewith a visa.

Much of this story has been recounted elsewhere. It is included here just to round-out the directionlessness and planlessness of my life so far. When asked when I first realized I was an artist I reply honestly that such realization does not apply in my life. I like to move about, to see what is happening, and to participate.

Maria Thereza Alves and I met in '78 when she worked as a volunteer in our offices at the United Nations. We met, then, in a political context in which we were both activists. After I left the Treaty Council and my position in the American Indian Movement we had no money at all and both had to find jobs. Me, once again as a construction laborer, but my back had become quite bad for such work. (I was then past forty years old.) Maria Thereza enrolled in art school and also began the Brazilian Information Center. Soon she was the representative of the new Workers Party of Brazil to the U.S., and was often in Washington and meeting with U.S. labor leaders.

My intention was to write a history of American Indian struggles of the twentieth century. The book of poems, *Columbus Day*, was also in progress and we were active in small ways for the next few years in New York in various coalitions and support groups for struggles in Nicaragua,



El Salvador, Puerto Rico. For a while I worked with the women's organization of the American Indian Movement in connection with an international conference on water.

I was not being an artist—I was not *not* being an artist. When I left Geneva I went to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, then various cities in the mid-west where we had legal trials. The Hoffritz pocket knife was still in my pocket and I was constantly carving small pieces of bone or wood, making jewelry and such. When someone admired what I was working on I gave it to him or her, as I had done as a child. I was making a large Bowie knife for Russell Means, from a section of a car spring. It would have had a deer antler handle and a buffalo tail sheath. It never got finished and at some point I gave the blade away.

In New York I was playing with the odd things I might find, including animal skulls. I was too depressed over our political situation to write. Once in Mexico I said to Maria Thereza that, if anything, I was a professional bum. Although even now if I'd had any formal education I would want to be a biologist.

I've been a little hesitant over the years to speak of these things because maybe people would think I'm not as serious and committed to my work as some professional artist such as, for example, Gerhard Richter might be. But, well, I am quite serious. I do not see art as a profession even though I have been lucky and happy with my luck at once-in-a-while being able to live by concentrating on art.

SUPPLEMENT B

It is now difficult for younger artists, maybe, to understand how tight and silly the art systems were only twenty years ago. When people began looking at the hidden art histories of the sixties and seventies, didn't we all feel kind of liberated?

By the time of the mid-nineties we could see that the structures and definitions of art were only nonsense. And certainly against art. Now we see that anything can be art—if the artist is good enough. It may look as though there is more bad art now, but the truth is simply that there is more art. And most art has always been bad. Most books are bad, most movies. Most restaurants serve bad food. This, sadly, is not a new trend, it's just the state of things.

The first show I did at CIRCA Gallery in Geneva was called *Little Black Things*. Nothing was as big as my hand and all the pieces were for sale for minus one centime each. Jaqueline Vauthier brought a museum director from France to see it. He wanted to buy the entire installation but could not. The price was wrong. I was not willing to make a deal with him. Last year, 2011, Friedrich Meschede invited me to make an outdoor work for a sculpture park in Cologne. A year earlier I had happened upon a timber depot in the port of Nantes. Thousands of really giant hardwood tree trunks were laid out, having come from African and Pacific forests.

I thought to buy one and just lay it in the park. It turns out that many also come into the port of Hamburg, so we found one closer to home than Nantes. We bought an African mahogany tree trunk, not as large as some, because of weight. It is almost two meters in diameter, but only about six meters long, maybe eight.



Supposedly this is all legal wood, but even so—what strange thoughtless bravery to cut down such a tree. They are then used mostly to make luxury yachts for the growing crowd of billionaires out there.

I did not want to change the tree trunk, nor even to show this kind of information; thinking that it could exist still powerfully on its own, bringing questions to the minds of some people.

SUPPLEMENT C

Don't worry, this is quite short—just a story about our beautiful studio in Berlin that I must tell you:

For four years we had a studio in the Grunewald forest in Berlin. It was the last building on a small street, so the forest was our garden. It was part of a building commissioned by Hitler for his favorite artist, Arno Breker, in 1940, the year I was born. Before Maria Thereza and I there had been Breker himself, then the Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell. No one else.

The main work-room was a seven-and-a-half meter cube with a line of four meter windows showing the forest on two sides. There were two bathrooms; upstairs a small room and Maria Thereza's darkroom.

We had a table outside and had meals there in good weather, shared with a squirrel family we had made friends with, three kinds of forest mice and many birds, including a robin who had convinced me to work for him turning over logs and stones. We fed about a ton of birds a ton of food every day all year long. In the evenings wild boars would visit, the occasional fox and badger.

Rome and Berlin, 2012