

Conforming to a canon of good art

Jimmie Durham and self-criticism



«Still Life with Stone and Car» (2019), Jimmie Durham

Over thirty years ago, American sculptor Jimmie Durham wrote a brief, scathingly ironic paper titled “A Friend of Mine Said that Art is a European Invention.” In it, he explored the concept of art and its cultural roots, arguing that what has traditionally been considered ‘art’ [in the West] has been heavily shaped by European history, philosophy, and aesthetics. He suggests that this definition excludes other cultural expressions and practices that might not fit within the European framework but are still valid forms of creativity and expression.

The article touches on how colonialism has influenced the way art is perceived globally. European powers often dismissed or devalued the cultural expressions of colonised peoples, labelling them as ‘crafts,’ ‘artifacts,’ or ‘ethnographic objects’ rather than art and reinforcing the idea that European art holds a superior place in global culture. In fact, conversations around restitution and repatriation today still perpetuate this dismissal of non-European cultural goods. Compare, for example, the concerted international response to recovering Nazi-looted artworks (of European origin) compared to the protracted struggle to restitute the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. Durham moved to broaden this definition, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of what

art is. He suggests that by recognising the diverse ways different cultures create and appreciate art, we can move beyond a narrow, Eurocentric definition.

He wrote: “the nationalism of states is rapidly becoming a thing of the past, having been forced out by its own suppression of the histories of ethnic groups,” putting into words a sentiment that had been troubling white theorists for several decades. Until the twentieth century (and in many ways still today) European artistic canons overlooked works by artists of colour, women, and any cultural producer who failed to conform to the canon of heterosexual, white men. This tendency, as Durham pointed out, created the illusion that art, or at least, good art, was principally produced by European artists. This tradition presents obvious problems: “if internationalism is a requirement for civilization, what nation is civilized enough to participate?”

Durham offers a case study of a hypothetical migrant caught between different cultures, struggling with the disconnection and alienation that arises from migration. She is not associated with one specific ethnicity or nationality; rather, she represents anyone who has been uprooted from their homeland and is navigating a new cultural environment.

The exile finds herself cast out from her nation state after positing that glass was a fourth state of matter - an idea which flooded her fellow citizens with fear and anger. Ultimately, her novelty wears off on the inhabitants of her new nation state, and she finds herself ignored and normalised - a progression that eventually prompts her to take her own life. Durham uses this hypothetical figure to illustrate how European concepts of art and culture can marginalise and invalidate the experiences and expressions of those from non-European backgrounds, particularly migrants who bring with them different cultural practices and artistic traditions. The migrant is emblematic of some of the broader themes Durham was exploring, particularly the ways in which cultural identity and artistic expression are shaped by displacement, colonialism, and the imposition of Eurocentric norms.

Throughout the article, Durham reflected on his own experiences as an artist of Cherokee heritage dealing with the intersection of different cultural views on art. He questioned the idea that one culture's perspective on art should dominate, advocating for a more pluralistic approach. However, Durham's Cherokee heritage is a topic of some disagreement as Indigenous groups across the United States largely denied his claims and his eligibility for Indigenous citizenship. This contestation of his heritage adds an interesting layer to the topics he explored in the article. One of the central themes was the question of authenticity and identity, particularly in the context of cultural representation. If Durham's claims to Cherokee heritage were not recognised by official Indigenous bodies, it challenges his authority to speak on behalf of Indigenous perspectives. This could, of course, lead some to view his critiques of Eurocentric definitions of art as less credible or even appropriative, undermining his position as a critic of European cultural dominance.

The issues of colonialism and power imbalances, which Durham addresses by highlighting how European definitions of art have historically marginalised non-European traditions, are similarly affected. If Durham's identity as an Indigenous person was seen as inauthentic, his work could be interpreted as perpetuating the same kind of cultural appropriation that he critiques.

Further, his advocacy for a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of art also loses some of its momentum following the questioning of his identity. If his own identity is in question, it raises doubts about the sincerity of his call for inclusivity and respect for diverse cultural expressions. The controversy can be seen as a form of cultural gatekeeping by Indigenous groups, asserting their right to define who belongs to their community and who can authentically represent them. This gatekeeping reflects similar issues of power

and control that Durham himself critiques, though they, of course, operate in a context outside of colonial power imbalances. This also somewhat undermines his argument against Eurocentrism as he perpetuated a similar dynamic by claiming an identity that was not rightfully his.

By focusing on the migrant, Durham highlights the dissonance between the rich, diverse cultural heritage that migrants carry with them and the often narrow, exclusionary definitions of art that prevail in Europe. The migrant's struggle is a metaphor for the broader struggle of non-European cultures to have their artistic and cultural contributions recognised and valued within a Eurocentric framework. This hypothetical figure serves as a powerful vehicle for Durham's critique of the ways in which art, as traditionally defined by European standards, can fail to encompass the full range of human creativity and expression, particularly those rooted in different cultural contexts. However, the controversy around Durham's heritage prompts a deeper reflection on the role of personal identity in his work. His critiques of Eurocentrism and his reflections on art might now be viewed through a more personal lens, one that is charged with internal contradictions related to his own identity and the right to represent a culture. This makes his arguments both more personal and more contested.

In the end, of course, Durham concludes that it is ridiculous to think that art could not (or did not) exist before development in Europe; it is only Europe's notions of 'art' and 'good' art that flourished there and gained enough traction to secure a place in their artistic canon.

Additionally, ideas meant to signify the end of white reign over the art world, like *postcolonialism* and *postmodernism*, have not served to eliminate the use of 'Western' or 'European' in art discourse or these concepts' roles as focal points, which rather defeats their purpose. As long as artistic discourse continues to focus on European avant-gardism, we will never be able to open up the field in a way that presents European art as one historical tradition among many.

References : Durham, Jimmie. "A Friend of Mine Said that Art is a European Invention." In Jean Fischer (Ed.) *Global Visions*, 113-119. London: Kala Press, 1994.