

1000 WORDS

## Jimmie Durham

TALKS ABOUT HIS SURVEY THIS MONTH AT THE MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS/ARC

*Are those real poems or did you write them yourself?*

—Overheard by Jimmie Durham

JIMMIE DURHAM DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE'S DOING, but this is a good thing. In a practice spanning four decades and encompassing performance, sculpture, drawings, video, and writing, he has continuously resisted the idea that art should put forward an intricate concept or express a system of belief. He has argued that art is an intellectual endeavor that should activate and participate in a dialogue rather than take a position. He doesn't want to make *real* art—as in, learned, authenticated, autonomous art—he wants to make art *himself*, in conversation with any number of discourses and always with the hope of not knowing more than he knows.

Durham has described his life in the United States as one act of resistance after another. An American Indian of the Cherokee tribe born in 1940 in Arkansas, he had wanderlust from a young age. He left home for Texas at sixteen and eventually landed in New York in the 1970s, where he worked as the director of the American Indian Movement's International Indian Treaty Council and fought for the rights of Native Americans at the United Nations. Understandably frustrated by the American government's empty promises and intractable policies, he chose to leave the United States for good in 1987 and moved to Mexico. Since the mid-'90s he has been living in Europe, where a survey of the past fifteen years of his work is scheduled to open January 30 at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. (The exhibition continues until April 12.)

As his peripatetic lifestyle attests, Durham is a man of the world. But his sense of homelessness goes beyond the geographic: Home, for Durham, is a place where knowledge becomes safe and secure, where everything is known and expertise established. And this is no place for him. He thrives on doubt and confusion, on continually asking why we think we know what we ostensibly know and how we came to that (mis)understanding.

Durham works with many different materials, both natural and artificial, but he is particularly drawn to those that have historically been used to make tools—bone, wood, feathers, and, increasingly, stone. He finds many such objects while taking walks, and he collects stones—some small enough to hold in his hand and others several times his body weight—like he's adopting new friends. For Durham, stone is the ultimate sculptural form, not only because one can carve into it to create a representation but also because each stone is itself a slowly changing entropic sculpture, shaped over time by the elements. Indeed, Durham is fascinated by the *personality* of stones, by the ways in which a static object can become incredibly active, a character in an unfolding story—quite aside from how such anthropomorphism may call to mind totems or other ritualistic objects.

Moreover, stone's status as sculpture, and consequently its prominent role in the history of art, is provocatively reversed through Durham's use of stone as a

tool for sculpting other materials. He has taken stones to all kinds of matter—using them to smash tubes of paint onto paper or plywood, resulting in colorful and spontaneous abstract drawings of primary colors; to sink a boat in a river estuary, where it is visible only at low tide; and to throw repeatedly at a refrigerator in a courtyard, as if enacting an antiquated punitive ritual, the dimpled scars on the martyred white surface remaining as permanent marks of its public stoning.

Cars have recently been subjected to similarly destructive treatment. For *Still Life with Stone and Car*, presented at the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, Durham dropped a large rock onto a Ford Festiva. Then, in 2007, a Dodge Spirit was crushed by a lava boulder for *Spirit of the Xitle*, which sits on a residential street in Mexico City named after the volcano of the work's title. If such occurrences might ordinarily provoke a sense of disquiet, reminding one of the recent mishaps in Manhattan in which large chunks of buildings fell to the street, or of the car bombs we have grown so accustomed to hearing about, these damaged cars counterintuitively engender a sense of buoyancy. Perhaps it's the wide-eyed faces that Durham has painted onto the boulders' craggy surfaces, as if to say, "You can try to contain nature, but it will always win." Or perhaps it is that removing even one car from the road in a highly congested city feels like an act of resistance. The artist has also twice taken aim at light aircraft; in one such work, made especially for the Paris show, the boulder's force split the plane in two. Despite their humor, these works refuse to let us forget the colonial subjugation of indigenous peoples and the shameless "borrowing" of aspects of their cultures for branding purposes—evident, for example, in the predilection of many large corporations for naming their products "Cherokee" or "Tomahawk."

Durham is a funny man, quick to smile and generous with his humor. But the jokes he tells in his work do not include a punch line, for that would portend the end of the story. Rather, his work is an ongoing conversation, and the humor that permeates his sculpture is a tactical strategy that appears innocuous but is in fact highly critical. His work poses big questions, but in brief and connected phrases. He asks us to consider the history of oppression, the futility of violence, and the powerlessness of our positions in the world, but allows us to contemplate these dour realities while keeping smiles on our faces. And because of this, his work is inherently hopeful. Life's a bitch, he seems to say, but nonetheless, life is good. Durham's work suggests that if small gestures of critical inquiry do not engender immediate or monumental change, they *can* help open our eyes to aspects of life that are normally masked by the hegemony of mainstream culture. Dropping a boulder on an airplane or a car may not stop corporations from using Native American culture as if it were a corpse waiting for the marketing vultures, but it sure feels great. Durham reminds us that change and understanding can happen in modest steps, with patience, grace, and a lifetime of commitment—and that the first step on this path is to stop taking ourselves so seriously.

—ANNE ELLEGOOD

JANUARY 2009 187





Jimmie Durham, *Still Life with Stone and Car*, 2004, car, rock, paint. Installation view, Sydney Opera House. From the 2004 Biennale of Sydney. Photo: Jenni Carter.





This page: Jimmie Durham making *St. Frigo*, Rheims, France, 1996. Opposite page: Jimmie Durham, *The Dangers of Petrification* (detail), 1998–2007, vitrine with objects and text, 78 3/4 x 19 1/16 x 30 1/16".

**I LIKE TO MAKE THINGS** that are more or less portable—nothing much bigger than my own body. But, as people say, one thing often leads to another: Ever since I dropped a five-ton piece of marble onto a Ford Festiva for the 2004 Sydney Biennale, I have been making more works that are large, if not exactly monumental, because they have been in demand. And so it wasn't surprising that when the director of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Fabrice Hergott, asked me to have this retrospective, he specifically asked for larger works. I'm sure the request was made partly with the strange, large, horseshoe shape of the museum's exhibition space in mind. But it's also partly a response to criticisms of the scale of another survey I conceived in 2001 for the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. At that time, after having lived in Europe for seven years, I'd started imagining a sort of public report of my arts activities: a thorough assessing of my European work, which consisted of very many smallish pieces. Unfortunately, the Palais's director of contemporary art programs, Piet Coessens, was

fired—suddenly and stupidly—and so the show only appeared in France, at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Marseille, and at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. In fact, in Holland, the publisher of the catalogue declared bankruptcy and did not return the money given to it by the museums, so no book was made—meaning that what's left is several people's impression that it looked like a mere gallery show. The works just weren't very big. This new retrospective therefore takes a somewhat odd form; almost everything is large and, in turn, recently made.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, I worked with everything I found, whether it was objects or material. In general, though, I find man-made objects too talkative and boring, while I am a fanatical lover of all that material is—plastic, bone, iron, wood. In the United States, the poor stuff of our continent has been so degraded and feared; I am not sure that anyone over in Europe, for example, would have had the idea to carve giant heads of national leaders into the side of a mountain. That kind of pragmatic

contempt for the natural environment seems a product of the colonists of the Americas.

Europeans are, however, traditionally more tied to the Beaux-Arts Academy idea of there being proper materials for art production. I remember how most people in Europe during the early '70s, when I first spent time there, still had definite ideas about this—Marcel Broodthaers's mussel shells, for instance, were not yet widely known or accepted—and, moreover, these ideas were tied to still other prohibitive opinions. I quickly grasped how religious much architecture in Europe is, steeped in monumentalism and belief. European art seemed like a servant to architecture in a system designed for enforcing religious belief. And so when I eventually moved back to Europe in 1994, I decided to work primarily with stone, as an antiarchitecture, antimonument tool. "Written in stone," people say, intending it as a sign of permanence. Wanting to portray a little Jewish guy, Michelangelo chose a very large piece of white marble. It looks more like Goliath than David. But stone has been a good tool for a long time.



And yet many objects really are beautiful, aren't they? Is there anyone who does not love oak barrels, with their beautiful shape, texture, and technology? I love metal oil barrels in the same way. They are ubiquitous, especially in the southern United States, where they are made into barbecue grills, pontoon piers, doghouses . . . and in the early '80s in New York, groups of homeless men would make fires in them and stand around, warming themselves, just as we have seen in dozens of films. When these oil drums are new, they have marvelous words on them, like "Shell" or "Total"; when I was a boy, I remember there was the Humble Oil Company, whose barrels bore the legend "Humble." For decades, I have used oil barrels, usually the ones that proclaim "Total," which are bright orange. For the show in Paris, I am making a new piece titled after the petroleum-industry classification "sweet light crude." It is twenty-five oil barrels stacked three barrels high, each one painted a different pastel color and with a different word: TRUE, PURE, GOOD, BRAVE, and so on.

One of my first pieces after I moved to Europe in the '90s was an edition of twenty-five television sets for a gallery in Antwerp. I threw a cobblestone at the screen of each one, breaking it. There were two assistants who would take away the completed piece and bring out the next television set, because we were also recording the action on video. At first it was pleasant work, with a satisfying explosion and ensuing sound of falling glass. But after breaking four or five television sets I began to feel nervous. The remaining televisions all waited in a small room, and my sympathy for them grew with each throw. Before the end, I was feeling sad and guilty. A year later, I chose a '50s-style refrigerator to stone. I reasoned that an old fridge, unlike a television or automobile, would be completely neutral to me and to everyone else—that we would feel neither delight nor remorse at my violence toward it. So every morning for a week or so, I carted the fridge out to the courtyard and threw cobblestones at it for a couple hours. I wanted to change its shape. Yet even on the very first morning I saw that my action would be uncomfortable for me. The innocent fridge was so quiet, so pure white; in the end I gave it the title *St. Frigo*. Later that same year, Maria Thereza Alves and I took a residency to make videos. For one, I threw a stone

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through a shopwindow, from the inside out to the street. But the first video was about a stone sinking a boat: We found the stone, roughly the size of a basketball, on the beach; then I made the boat. There was no discomfort at all when it sank, probably because I had made it myself, and, more specifically, made it to have a brief moment of glory. The curators of the Paris show asked me to comment on the theme of violence in so many of these works. But I found that I cannot speak sensibly

about it. Throwing stones at man-made objects, or dropping boulders on them, is not like May '68; it's not even an echo. For me, it is more like a mimetic reenactment of nature.

*The Dangers of Petrification* is another new piece—or maybe it's an ongoing piece—which pretends to be a scientific collection of objects that have been petrified. I am a little hesitant about it, because most people nowadays have little knowledge about the real world. In fact, lately I've found that most people do not know that the process of petrification even exists, and that the cliché "petrified with fear" has led them to think that the word *petrified* relates only to a state of fear. That said, this piece began with a different kind of human craziness: the phenomenon of things reminding us of, or looking like, other things. Walking along, I pick up a stone: "This looks like a potato," I say. Over years of walking around Europe, I have found a petrified slice of an apple, petrified pecorino, petrified pumpernickel,

petrified cake, and various kinds of candy, among other curiosities. On the banks of the Po River, I found a petrified cloud. To explain how such a thing could happen needs a long scientific explanation concerning temperature variations between air, cloud, and sea, atmospheric mineral salts, wind strength, and turbulence. (For obvious reasons, cloud petrification occurs only over the ocean.) All of these petrified objects are properly labeled and displayed in a large vitrine.

A couple years ago, the city of Brussels asked me to submit a design for a public sculpture for a traffic roundabout. It was an interesting project because the work should not be very interesting. The drivers should not be too distracted by art. We want them to drive carefully. I decided on a simple long metal pole with a branch near the top. A vulture is perched on the branch watching the traffic. The piece is called *Thinking of You*. Brussels did not want it, but I am making it for Paris in cast aluminum painted flat black. The pole will be steel tubing.

Inevitably, however, the central piece in Paris will be a very large stone on a single-engine airplane. I made the work last summer in an old Russian airfield outside of Berlin, near the Polish border. The airplane was in working condition and would have been sold in Africa—though it was considered unsafe in Europe—and will rest at the foot of a large set of stairs. It is almost eight meters by eight meters but fairly easy to transport, since the stone broke it in two, meaning the piece can travel in two parts. The airplane looks really grounded. But it also makes me a little nervous. I remember how, after Sydney, the car pieces became popular—people enjoy seeing a car get what's coming to it—and I ended up making a few versions, which are similar in the way that paintings are similar. But when Christo and Jeanne-Claude started wrapping things, they could not have known that they would spend the next fifty years going around the world looking for new and bigger things to wrap. I can imagine myself in a similar predicament—this phenomenon is so often equated with success. It can be relatively easy to find bigger ships, bigger airplanes, bigger boulders. A stoned Concorde might have a sense of appropriateness. But without a good business manager I would not know where to show it. □

—Jimmie Durham

