

Various

Elements

On the occasion of a major retrospective at M HKA in Antwerp, Jimmie Durham talks to *Kirsty Bell* about enthusiasm, itinerancy, cities, poetry and Cherokee mythology

Born in 1940 in Arkansas, USA, Jimmie Durham is an artist, activist and poet living in Europe. He has been involved with the American Indian Movement and served as their representative to the United Nations. He participated in documenta(13) and his retrospective at M HKA, Belgium, is on show until 18 November. His work is included in the Taipei Biennial until 13 January 2012, and a solo exhibition at Fondazione Morra Greco in Naples, Italy, opens in December. A new volume of his previously unpublished poems, entitled Poems That Do Not Go Together – five of which are exclusively reproduced here – is published by Wiens Verlag, Berlin, and Edition Hansjörg Mayer, London.

A Pole to Mark the Center of the World in Berlin, 2004, wooden stick, mirror, 83 x 61 cm

It is a sunny Saturday afternoon in Antwerp, five days before the opening of Jimmie Durham's retrospective exhibition 'A Matter of Life and Death and Singing' at M HKA. Most of the 120 plus works in the show – dating from the early 1980s to the present – have been unpacked but not yet installed. Even so, it is thrilling to see these eclectic pieces assembled and up close: animal skulls with psychedelic patterning; car parts configured to approximate romantically stereotypical American Indian artefacts; extraordinary blocks of petrified wood; oil cans brightly painted with stencilled text forming a kind of installation-as-poetry; industrial PVC pipes from which a pecking face emerges.

I find Durham in the workshop tucked away beyond the ground floor exhibition rooms. As we speak, he is fixing part of a sculpture from the installation *Pocahontas and the Little Carpenter in London*, which was originally shown at Matt's Gallery, London, in 1987. It is a snake, about a metre long, with painted tail and head, accessorized with wooden beads and a little jingling bell on its tail. He had cut

it in half in order to fit it in his suitcase to bring to London. Holding half of the snake in one hand, the artist uses a small wood-handled knife to pick away at the dried-up glue left over from a mangled repair job undertaken by unknown hands at some time in the past. Later, when playing back the recording of the interview, I can hear the chip, chip, chip of the knife, while power saws, drills and staple machines from elsewhere in the workshop can also be heard in the background. Despite these aural distractions, Durham's voice comes through, clear, slow-paced and resonant. Each word is measured, considered a well-aimed. The seriousness of his words is softened however, by intermittent chuckling and light, agile wit; a good cop/bad cop combination which also goes to animate his politically oriented and highly engaged sculptures, writings, videos and performances. The artist spent the 1970s as a political organizer for the American Indian Movement, working for recognition of the rights of his people and against their ongoing colonial oppression, which deprived them not only of land, but also of cultural values. The predicament of his own and other indigenous peoples has informed his artistic production since, in a rigorous, if playful, unpicking of assumed cultural, social and political cornerstones: architecture, religion and nationality.

KIRSTY BELL

How do you feel about the prospect of this retrospective exhibition, which includes works that you probably haven't seen for 30 years or so?

JIMMIE DURHAM

All my works stay in my mind, so I'm neither pleased nor displeased to see them again. For me, it's about the practicalities, as I have to repair all the damage works. I just think: 'Why wasn't this ever polished or 'Why was this sawn in two?'



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1
A Staff To Mark The Center Of The World,
2004, wooden sticks, keyrings
and artist's handwritten notes,
each: 200 × 10 × 10 cm

2
Odds and Ends, 2011,
wood, bones, seashells, glass and tissue,
55 × 60 × 75 cm

3
Que Linda Esta la Mañana („How beautiful is
the morning“) („The little birds are singing“,
„the moon is growing“), 2010, acrylic paint on
deerskin, 66 × 25 cm

4
La Malinche, 1988–91,
wood, cotton, snakeskin, watercolour,
polyester and metal,
168 × 56 × 84 cm

*'People still ask where Noah's Ark was or whether
the forbidden fruit was an apple or a fig. Oh, shut up! There wasn't any!
It's just a story.'*

KB *In your essay for the catalogue, you talk about work being generative – is this exhibition another example of work generating work?*

JD What I meant was that it doesn't necessarily lead to intelligent work; in fact, it can often lead to stupid work. That's a general problem of enthusiasm. You think you're being smart when you're being very dumb. When I'm very enthusiastic about something, I'm usually very foolish.

KB *So you try and control the exhilaration?*

JD Yes, but I don't know how to. I'm including a piece here at M HKA that I made for an exhibition in Oxford [*Various Elements from the Actual World*, shown in 'Transmission Interrupted', Modern Art Oxford, 2009], which I haven't shown since. Everyone who has seen images of it has remained completely silent about it, apart from Anders Kreuger [the exhibition's curator] who said: 'I wouldn't put this in the show if I were you.'

KB *So you took that as a good sign?*

JD Yes! It was one of those labour-intensive works where you paint and sculpt and glue and all of that, and I like the nonsense of it. It was such enthusiastic fun making it. Day after day of doing things – it was such a long process – and I hadn't seen it since that show in Oxford, until yesterday.

KB *And?*

JD And I like it very much!

KB *On the DOCUMENTA (13) website, where all of the 'participants' are categorized, you are the only one listed as an artist, writer and activist. Was there ever a time when you felt like just concentrating on your writing and not making the sculptures, or vice versa?*

JD It happens very often. I would like now to take a year or maybe even two years off from art-making and write: there are two books I want to write. And, I would also like to take two years off to go to Brazil and work with old tropical wood, and not do it for any reason except the love of doing it. And I would like to get myself a new studio in Naples and spend a year just doing work there. So, I am never satisfied. But I do have a new book of poems coming out, which I am very pleased about.

KB *Some months ago, you gave a very engaging lecture as part of a conference about art in the public realm, in which you talked about what you called the 'man-on-horseness' of public art in Europe, amongst many other things. You also discussed Richard Serra's Tilted Arc [1981], and how you and your partner, Maria Thereza Alves, were the only artists amongst those who opposed it. Your own approach to making art in the public space – the African Mahogany tree trunk laid out in a sculpture park in Cologne [Pagliaccio non son, 2011], for instance – gestures against this kind of monumentalism.*

JD I think public art is always a strange idea, as I said at that conference. To put something in the public sphere as art that stays there every day is invasive, it's stupid and it's only public in the sense that it's against the public – that the public have been suckered and sold something. When I was in London several years ago, they were running a programme called 'Poems on the Underground' [1986–ongoing], in which beautiful poems featured on the tube. That's public poetry, but it is not someone on the street corner blasting poetry though a loud speaker, is it? You don't *have* to read it. On the other hand, you *must* walk around the Serra piece. You *must* be oppressed by bad sculpture that sticks out there for ever and ever.

KB *So, the tree you placed in the park in Cologne is the least invasive form of public art?*

JD Yes, but there are a lot of public art criminals around it.

KB *In 1980 you stopped working as a political activist and began to concentrate on your work as an artist and writer. Although I don't necessarily see a complete disconnect between one and the other, aren't the audiences somewhat different?*

JD I am trying to be an activist again, in a certain way, but just with words. And I'm trying to do the opposite of what I did in the 1970s when I was our UN representative, for Indians of the Americas.

We were the umbrella group for many organizations, including the Shuar Confederation of Ecuador and the Mapuche Confederation of Chile, amongst others. We have specific histories of invasion and colonization by Europe, and in every case in the Americas the invasion is celebrated and the colonization is denied. We wanted to force the international community to look at that exact situation. I constantly go letters, at least once a month, from Sami people in Scandinavia, from Ainu people in Japan, from the Bontoc people in the Philippines, and from a whole host of indigenous peoples from outside the Americas who have no representation. And I ignored the letters.

KB *Because you had enough to contend with dealing with the Americas?*

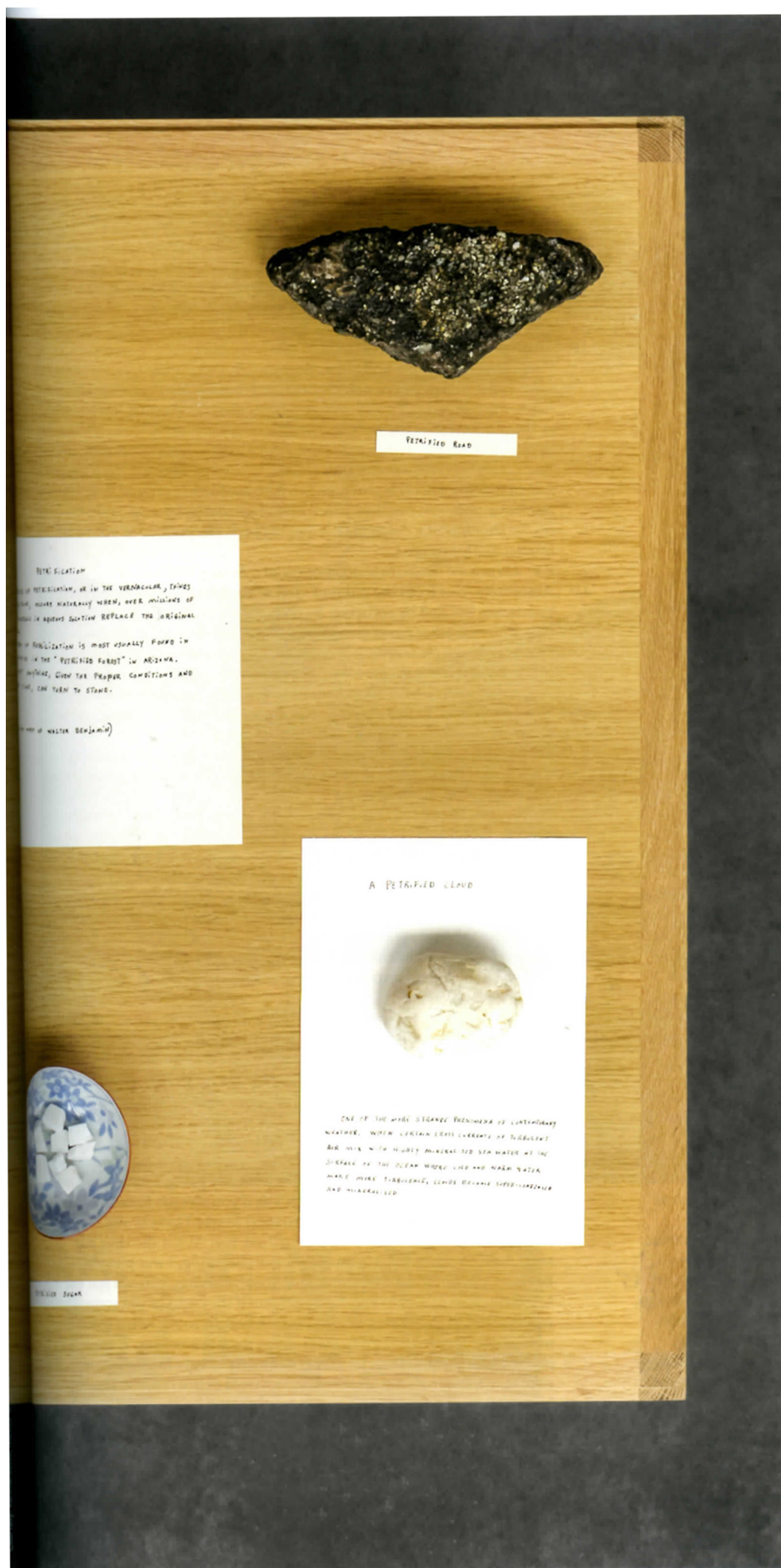
JD Yes, and because I didn't want our focus to be diluted to the plight of indigenous people worldwide, because then it gets romantic. But, in the end, all we could get approved by the UN was a permanent commission and a declaration of the rights of indigenous people worldwide.

We couldn't do anything about the Americas specifically. So, we took what we could get. But maybe I was wrong, and now I want to be an activist from the point of view of indigenous peoples the world over. It's a question of re-seeing. If I look at the world from the perspective of all indigenous people, what is the common denominator between us? Not that we are indigenous, not that we are closer to nature – none of these sentimental things. But the fact that we are stateless peoples. And we will always be stateless peoples. We cannot have an Israel.





*The Dangers of Petrification, 1998-2007,
stones, two knives, five ceramic
plates, three wooden chopping boards and
hand written papers, 100 x 200 x 75 cm*



We cannot even have a Kurdish state much less a Bontoc state, a South African Bushmen Pygmy state, a Sami state or any other state.

KB So, what's your perspective on the future?

JD This is my activist role. Because what I wanted at the UN I still want: I want total victory, total defeat of my enemy. How do I achieve this total victory? The states have to go away. I want us indigenous people to be recognized in the world because there is a world government to recognize us. And this would not be the United Nations; this would be the United People Against Nations. It has to be the end of white people. How do you achieve the end of white people? Get rid of the nations. Black people don't call themselves black people, Kenya don't call themselves black people; it's only the people from European nations who have this concept that they are white people. If they didn't have their nations, they'd lose their whiteness at the same time. They have to join the human race.

KB Is writing the medium you intend to use in your reprisal of activism?

JD Yes, writing and public speaking. I hope it will be more than talk, but I don't know what form the 'more than talk' would take. The nicest thing about this agenda is that it's about people developing a new mindset. It won't have anything to do with the old forms of political activity – what we used to call the 'armed struggle', those kinds of things.

KB That's the hardest part: finding a vocabulary that stops people from slipping back into familiar old arguments. Another problem, which was highlighted at this year's Berlin Biennale, is the misunderstanding that art is merely a vessel for politics, the disbelief that art can be intrinsically political. You talk about art being an intellectual activity that is not dependent on language, one that is beyond language. It seems essential to believe that if you want to work with art's political potential.

JD I have to believe that I can do art daily – quotidianly, as intellectuals would say – only if I can do it from an intellectual point of view, otherwise I wouldn't have the courage. If I were making art as a business I wouldn't have the courage to continue.

KB You left America in 1987, moving first to Cuernavaca in Mexico, and since 1994 you have lived in various European cities, now dividing your time between Berlin and Naples. You describe yourself as being a citizen of Eurasia. This mobile sense of place comes through in your work, and is particularly well articulated by your series 'Poles to Mark the Centre of the World' (1995–ongoing), in which wooden poles are variously adorned and installed in locations you have visited and worked in – from Yakutsk, Russia, to Gwangju, Korea.

JD I started out with the idea that Eurasia would have seven centres of the world because Cherokee mythology states that there are 'seven directions', and I thought I would make a pole for each direction. The seven key directions we believe in are: up, down, north, south, east, west and inside yourself. There are many more, however:

THE WEDDING • JULY 1, 2002

I was not invited to the wedding but did not attend.
 There were dates, most likely, dried apricots
 And little cakes.
 The bride was blown to bloody bits.
 Not being there, I was worse than innocent;
 No bystander. The radio told me about it.
 North of Kabul, the younger sister of the bride,
 Yes, the younger sister was squashed down
 Into the bloody sand.
 So was her mother and the groom (Boom! No more room!)
 'The people of Afghanistan are prepared to make sacrifices.'
 Pieces of dirty metal entered the groom's right hand,
 And rudely entered his neck, and the groom's chest
 And his stomach, legs, head, and feet; flying so
 Quickly he was dead before he heard the sound.
 I was far away, almost everyone who did not attend
 The wedding was far away and as I write
 Distance ourselves, become more far away.

Berlin

LEFT FOR DEAD

Like a dead Comanche' pony
 It bites the dust.
 Its dry tongue dragging in the sand
 And its eyes staring holes in the sky.
 The sole is torn, worm from miles
 Of work.
 Who places these mateless, forlorn
 Shoes in deserts?
 Who throws single shoes from
 Windows of cars to deserted shoulders
 Of highways?
 In honor of history and its marches let us
 Have a closet museum of dropped and discarded
 Shoes.

Texas, 1966

These five previously unpublished poems are excerpted from
 Jimmie Durham's forthcoming volume *Poems That Do Not Go Together*, courtesy of
 Wiens Verlag, Berlin, and Edition Hansjörg Mayer, London.

HE WILL NOT HAVE BEEN ENOUGH

Hello animals of north america.
Hello coyote, pumas, chipmunks.
There is nothing I can have done.
I will have been unable
To block the animated cartoons.
Hello dead friends everywhere.
Hello almost forgotten, gone friends.
Will you have been willing
To smile again at my memory?
My words will not have kept you.
Good bye enemies! Hale and hearty!
Strong, willing cheerful, full
Of stamina enemies!
I have no sticks nor stones;
My words will never harm your bones.
(O stones and rough sticks! Fix me up!
I'm sorry to have brought you into this!)

A THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Pigs like beer.
I read in the newspaper.
Pigs like beer.
No reason not, but
How much should they get?
And, do they get rowdy,
Or sick like Englishmen?
Should beer for the younger
Pigs be rationed? Forbidden?
How might I stop these thoughts?

SNACK BAR
VARIATIONS

Sneak Bear
Snuck Boar
Snake Bare
Snock Beer
Snook Burr
Snick Boor
Snike Byre
Snuck Burr
Sneak Bare
Snake Beer
Snook Boor
Snack Bore
Snack Beer
Snack Bare
Smack Bar
Smack Bare
Smack Bear
Smack Boar
Slack Bear
Slack Beer
Slack Boor
Back Snar
Back Snore
Black Snare
Black Smear
Black Sneer
Or Perhaps
Bacr Snak