

Connexions and condensation in the work of Jimmie Durham¹

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Abstract

The internationally renowned artist Jimmie Durham, who now lives in Europe, elaborated throughout his career a work of contemporary art which is profoundly rooted in his Cherokee culture, while efficiently engaging the art world which gives him an increasingly important place (one of the rare such Amerindian artists). His artwork appears to combine: 1. Contemporary art devises and issues as well as western concepts and viewpoint which he uses and assesses within pieces which are made for a (western) art public, 2. his Cherokee perspective on objects and the world (and 3. his own poetics). The condensation of these two perspectives *within* art pieces is paradoxical, for they conceive and perceive things and relationships in the world in a priori incompatible ways. Paralleling his work, his own identity or persona is paradoxical, in that on the one hand he defines himself and is considered as an ‘international’ artist, therefore denying the ethnic label which has been applied to him in his early career and which he had to fight, and on the other hand he maintains that his only way to be is as a Cherokee. The continuous colonisation and stereotypification of his peoples in the USA, and their impossibility to be seen as themselves, which the artist feels deeply, cast light on his aim to be a “homeless orphan”. Being truly a Cherokee however does not prevent his being an “international artist”, but rather contributes to it, *and vice versa*.

Key words: contemporary art, Amerindia, multiple identity

Jimmie Durham is an internationally renowned artist (plastic arts and installations, performances, videos, poems). He was born in Arkansas (USA) in 1940 in a family of activists and sculptors, and was raised in the Cherokee culture. He left the USA (forever) in 1987, lived in Mexico and in 1994 settled in Europe (which he calls “Eurasia”). Today he lives in Rome, Italy. He became an artist without planning it, in

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the beginning of the 60s, and saw that this was his proper vocation. Later he obtained a diploma from the Geneva School of Fine Arts (Switzerland). When the Wounded Knee conflict (South Dakota) broke out in 1974, he became deeply involved in the American Indian Movement, which he represented in the United Nations, where he worked for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, until he resigned in 1980, disappointed by the impossibilities caused by internal strife. He then became full-time artist (still pursuing in his writings and speeches the 'direct' activism he actuated earlier in his life).

Durham's artistic career effectively started in the beginning of the 80s, in New York, at the height of multiculturalism and postmodernism. His work there engaged directly the stereotypes, deeply rooted in the American 'Narrative', against Indians (see for example Mulvey *et al* 1995). It was at this time assessed by the critics through the lenses of "authenticity" and of ethnic identity (this period's work was later called a 'postcolonial' contribution by the artworld), both of which he had to "deconstruct" in order to be considered, simply, an "artist". Indeed, he was at this time primarily seen as an "Indian artist" and his work not considered serious or relevant – the public did not feel concerned by the issues raised by the artist.

His artwork in this "American" period can be seen as comprehending two folds – which he summed up in calling himself a "neo-primitivist neo-conceptualist": 1) Ironically displaying stereotypes about Indians – up to the absurd, in order to demonstrate the construction and the invalidity of considering artefacts as "material manifestations of culture"² or "iconic signs" of ethnicity, and of the imperialist notion of "authenticity" (imposed upon Indian artists) (fig.1). The pieces bore iconic 'Indian' elements. This took the shape of an iconic "neo-primitivism". 2) Affirming himself as a contemporary artist, coining his own work, *at the same time*, "neo-conceptual". This art practice is obvious in exhibitions in which Durham engaged local histories, especially in Europe. During this period, pieces were explicitly related to imperial (colonial) history (fig.3 is "Malinche", a sculpture which was previously called "Pocahontas" in an exhibition in

2 Durham wrote: « There is a nefarious tendency to consider material manifestations as traditions. If we accept such absurd criteria, then horses among the Plains Indians and Indian beadwork must be seen as untraditional. Traditions exist and are guarded by Indian communities. One of the most important of these is dynamism, constant change – adaptability, the inclusion of new ways and new material – is a tradition that our artists have particularly celebrated and have used to move and strengthen our societies. That was most obvious in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Every object, every material brought in from Europe was taken and transformed with great energy. A rifle in the hands of a soldier was not the same as a rifle that had undergone Duchampian changes in the hands of a defender, which often included changes in form by employment of feathers, leather and beadwork. We [artists here] feel that by participating in whatever modern dialogues are pertinent we are maintaining this tradition" (« Ni' Go Tlunh A Doh Ka » [1986] in Durham & Fisher 1993).

London in 1988, where it was accompanied by a figure of Attakulakula, a Cherokee chief who went to sign a treaty with the king of England in the eighteenth century).



Fig.1: *Self-Portrait* (1991, courtesy Whitney Museum, New York)

Fig.2: *Tlunh Datsi* (1985, public collection, Berlin)

Fig.3: *Malinche* (1991, courtesy SMAK, Gent, Belgium)

Engaging local history appeared more obviously in the second, “Eurasian”, period of his work – when he moved to Europe – both in his work and in his practice, and in the reception which he then gained. The pieces did not exhibit ‘Indian’ iconic elements anymore, and the artist’s concern shifted toward some of this new place’s issues. Since then, he was no more primarily conceived as an “Indian”, but rather as an artist with a critical perspective. The fundamental “change” which happened, from the critics’ point of view, is that he confronted issues concerning primarily the preoccupations of the western world, which Durham observed and traced back to the birth of Christianity (and its relationship to “art”). The critics then perceived his work as “more universal” and “less political”.

The artist on several occasions has declared that he wants to be “a *participant* in Europe”. He noticed that Europe is grounded in architecture, and that architecture is linked to written language and belief. His stance against belief then aims at criticising architecture and monumentality. As he says, not to destroy them, but to play with them in order to criticise them and engage the viewer into a reflection about these notions and

his/her relation to them. “It’s not that I want to get rid of them”, says Durham, “I want us to be against them” (in an interview by Canadian curator Richard William Hill). In his artwork in general he came to consider architecture as a “sculptural project”, and chose stone are the primary material in it: he defines his project as “anti-architecture and anti-monumentality”, with the aim to make stones “light” and “free”. He uses them both as “foundation” and as “tools” (fig. 4, 5). Their usual role in western societies is changed, there are often perceived by critics to have “personalities”.

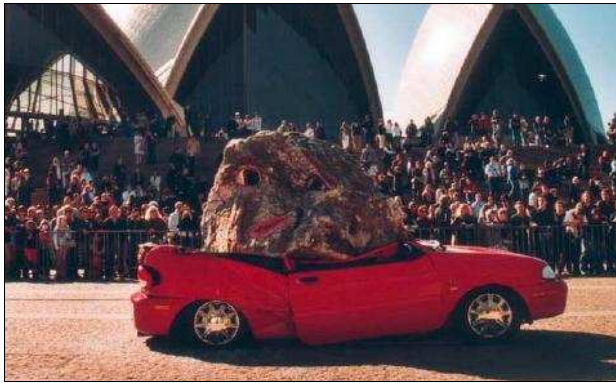


Fig.4: *Still Life with Stone and Car* (2004, at the Sydney Biennale, Australia)



Fig.5: *Saint Frigo* (1996, courtesy Ministry of Culture, Portugal)

Now an important thing to notice is that this criticism of ideologies – which is also a criticism of “consumption society”, critics usually stress (though it is not the issue according to the artist) – is in line with the preoccupations of the history of modern art throughout the twentieth century, as well as his use of found objects and ‘refuse’, in the questioning of the limits of art and linking art with life. This is the heritage of Marcel Duchamp’s *readymade*, who definitely opened the way for using whatever types of objects in art.

This brings us to what we could call, for convenience, a “Cherokee approach” to objects. The artist at times expresses that his practice is rooted in a Cherokee background which he “cannot escape” (in an interview with the author, he expressed the wish that “if we could make art free then art could make us a little bit free, couldn’t it?”). Nevertheless this appears to be a primary constituent of his approach to materials

and also, on another level, of the necessity to engage the political situation, which “*must*” be engaged because it exists and is oppressive³.

Throughout his career (fig.1-8), Jimmie Durham has always used materials and things according to a certain ‘feeling’ and respect he feels for them. Two characteristics could be brought forward (which appear most clearly in shamanistic practices): objects (materials, natural or manufactured things...) are considered as singularities (they are specific and exact), and defined by their properties (physical, functional) – and they function at the same time iconically and indicially (in Peirce’s sense). They can be linked with other things through connections at various levels (based on these properties). We could perceive here the basic characteristics of an “analogist” ontology, following Philippe Descola’s terminology (2005) – which are in various points, conflicting with the “naturalist” one⁴ (the one which prevails in the western world). In passing, but we cannot discuss this aspect further in this text, we mention that this doesn’t mean that objects stand as ‘metaphors’, as is often the case in western art, but are rather *active as such and simultaneously* in the various levels (because they are exact) – a chimera with tangible and untangible connotations. This exactness is the base for the connections, and this is underlined, in the attitude expressed by Durham, by the fact that the objects are never made to “lie” and that the artist is always “sincere” in the making of the pieces. Moreover, the artwork is *necessarily* included in a network of relationships between, at least, the ‘Artist’ and the ‘Recipient’ (to use Alfred Gell [1998] terminology), who ‘activate’ it with their relationship and communicative participation – this network being constitutive of the piece’s identity. There is also the

³ Durham has said, for example, in an interview with art critic published in the *Washington Post* in 1993: “I am a political activist because I feel it’s my responsibility to respond that way to the world. This is a responsibility we all have because this big old thing called the state is oppressing us all – it’s oppressive because it defines what really is and presents itself as a source of truth, and this has pretty much been the state of things since the birth of the written word”.

⁴ We recall that according to Descola (2005, my translation), “the various ways to organise the experience, individual and collective, of the world, could be reduced to a limited number of modes of identification corresponding to the different ways to distribute properties to the beings, that is to say, to endow them or not with some abilities which enable them to such and such type of action. Grounded on the various possibilities to impute to an undetermined *aliud* a physicality and an interiority which are analogous or unlike those which every human experience, identification can then be declined into four ontological formula”: naturalism, animism, analogism and totemism. In naturalism “humans are the only ones possessing the privilege of interiority while being linked to the continuum of the non-humans through their material characteristics”. In animism, “most beings are thought to have a similar interiority while being distinguished from each other by their bodies”. In analogism, “all elements of the world are differentiated ontologically from each other, therefore demanding that stable correspondences are to be found among them”. And, in totemism, some humans and non-humans “share, within a named class, the same physical and moral properties stemming from one prototype, while being distinguished as a group from other classes of the same type” (see Descola 2005).

necessary relationship with the world around (which could be summarized as an ‘importance of the place’), which, in the situation of age-long colonialism and survival, is necessarily political.



Fig.6: *Sweet, Light, Crude* (2009, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris)



Fig.7: *Spring Fever* (2010, Tatton Park Biennale, UK)

We could take an extreme example – although his overall approach has to be observed look at the wider range of pieces and practices. Recently Durham has been working increasingly with brightly painted oil barrels. Many commentators have seen these as a departure from his earlier work (because, for example, these are neither obviously ‘craftwork’ nor ‘refuse’). However this world remains basically within the same strand as ever. The artist has said to have used these barrels because of their being ubiquitous, as well as (fig.6) because the words printed on them encouraged him to make poems out of them, and (fig.7) because the barrels relate to oil issues which have wrecked the Cherokee country throughout the twentieth century. Both aspects stand in line with a ‘Cherokee approach’ of objects, and with the (necessarily) activist concern of the Amerindian artist. These works have been exhibited in European international contemporary art spaces, and valued as pieces of Durham’s critical artwork: concerning both general occidental issues *and* art issues.

This approach is interesting to his admirers in the artworld, which has recognized his work as an essential contribution to contemporary art. For example, the Belgian critic

and curator Anselm Franke in two particularly interesting articles (2007, 2009) about Durham's work, stressed that he is "a modern artist par excellence" (since, according to Bruno Latour "we have never been moderns", but also because he brings in a "negativity" which has usually been left out of "art")⁵. He grounds this claim in the fact that Durham's pieces function at the same time on the animist basis (in Frazer's sense), and undermine this non-modern attitude (an attitude against the autonomy of things and of the human subject) by exhibiting the actual fiction constructed by the artist in the piece (see fig.8 for example, as well as Hill [2010]'s text about it) – thereby establishing a "dialogical communication" between two therefore *really* autonomous interlocutors – the thing and the viewer (this also expresses a contemporary regain of interest for 'animism' in contemporary art). If we consider (strictly) the "naturalist" ontology as defined by Descola, such "dialogical communication" could not really happen within the western world. The artworld is however, within its set limits, a place where such 'fictions' are made possible and such experiences lived by the viewers – a context used as constitutive to the efficient communication of and with the piece.

Then it is their being situated within the gallery or museum space, together with the 'new' ontology of objects, made contemplate-able for the viewers, following Duchamp, which allow Durham's artworks to fully 'express' themselves – or 'live' – and operate, as he wishes to, according to a certain 'Cherokee approach' to objects (where, on top of the "animist" ontology considered by Franke, they are singularities and indices *as well as* icons). This approach indeed expects the viewer to *complete* the artwork which was elaborated by the artist in relation with his materials (connecting them in respect for their specificity and exactness), and this completion depends on an actual engagement from his/her part. Franke underlined this later aspect, as well as the interpellation and showing through of the artist's construction work. This later aspect is an example of the *multiple voices* that can be heard in the pieces (both literally, as a lot of Durham's pieces have seemingly incongruous texts attached to them, often with competing viewpoints, and conceptually in the juxtapositions of conflicting connotations in the components of the pieces).

⁵ « The continuity that [Durham] claims is [because of this personal history] thus the continuity of negativity – because his perspective is first of all that of modernity's other, not only in the sense of being exoticised, but because his perspective on modernity is first of all the historical and ongoing continuity of Indian oppression and genocide. In claiming his position as modern artist, he takes a position of a negative dialectics – that is, in his work, we always look into the face of civilisation's savagery, and in savagery, we always look at the possibility of civilisation » (Franke 2007 : 2).



Fig.8: *The Dangers of Petrification* (2009) (detail)⁶

The dichotomy considering two ‘sides’ of a ‘border object’ is here outlined for the sake of analysis. We could furthermore consider the artworks as kinds of “portraits” of the artist. Although it is impossible to ‘identify’ Jimmie Durham (because of the long history of oppression and politics of forced assimilation, and of course of resistance, and also because he has continuously worked at ‘blurring the boundaries’ – especially in the face of oppressive and silencing stereotypes and in order keep the ‘fight’), we could consider his persona as multiple, and, therefore, his work and his approach in devising it (following the studies by Severi 2007 and 2004 for example). This multiple identity of the artist appears not only in his discourses (‘I am not a Cherokee artist’ / ‘there is a Cherokee aspect in my work⁷’, and “my work is simply contemporary art [...] [and], it often deals with how whites identify themselves and the world” (open letter dated 1991 quoted in Shiff 1992), but above all in his art practice. His identity as a “multiple enunciator” is operating as and at the same time based on a “condensation of contradictory and simultaneous connotations” (Severi 2004)⁸. The artwork’s mechanisms also involve this paradox – a combination of contradictory viewpoints and ontologies (“naturalism” and “analogism” – a finer analysis of which would require a

⁶ This piece is an exemple of a mobilisation of scientific praticities and evidences, using museum display case and labels: here objects are “petrified” food, there is also a “petrified cloud” which bears the foolowing label (in french, as it was exhibited in a Paris museum): “C’est l’un des phénomènes les plus étranges du climat actuel : lorsque que des contre-courants de turbulences se mélangent à l’eau de mer fortement minéralisée à la surface de l’océan, où les courants d’eau froide et chaude provoquent davantage de tourbillons, il se produit ce phénomène de surcondensation et de minéralisation des nuages”.

⁷ “I am a traditional Cherokee artist. My work is not less universal than some other. I demand that it be approached with the expectation of universal responses. We want to be participants in all of art’s discourses” (« Ni’ Go Tlunh A Doh Ka » [1986] in Durham & Fisher 1993).

⁸ The process of ritual condensation has been studied by Houseman & Severi (2009). It can be summarised as “the association, within the same sequence of actions, of modes of relation which we ordinarily presume to mutually exclude one another”. The constructed identity thereby constructed is therefore also based on the networks of relations associated with these identities.

longer space than that of this text). First, the multiple and contradictory identity involved is at work in the artist's relationship with his art piece while making it, using images, materials and concepts of his audience. The mimesis which the artist performed in his "American" period can be seen as a mimesis *of the public's point of view* (involving stereotypes) on Indians and their works, in order to undermine them using irony. In the "Eurasian" period, this (iconical) mimesis is also that of the public, however considering the images which the later *has of itself*. The artist undermines them with a practice, which is not that of his public, but his own (Cherokee): using, throughout the process, materials as well as images and concepts ("evidences") which are usual to his public, however connected through a 'Cherokee approach' (among other things, the iconic mode is linked to the indicial one). Second, the paradoxical identity of the work triggers in the mental operations which are mobilised by the viewer in order to engage with the work, as Franke sketched (and many other commentators have noticed): he/she looks back at him/herself, reflecting on his/her normal against his/his new reaction (the 'new light' would be the unusual connexion). The aim – operating with the network of relations and within the complete piece completed as we mentioned earlier – is to instil doubt within the viewer where there previously was belief – intellectuality (which is dear to Durham), he claims, stems from being confused. Therefore, the artist's making "art" within the western art world allows him to be and practice a fundamental *part* of his identity (and the necessary political engagement), a Cherokee, as well as being himself, 'free' from the ancient prejudices of the 'Narrative', that is: an intellectual (also in the eyes of his western public in general), engaged in the world's discussions. It is then obvious that he masters the "naturalist" ontology⁹, through which his artwork can be viewed (it is devised for a western public), while not approving of it and being faithful to his own "analogist" conception and his own poetics. This could be seen as a "to be me is to be you, and vice versa" strategy (see Severi 2004).

The persona of the artist Jimmie Durham is generally considered a "global artist", as is the case for various other American Indian artists who exhibit their world throughout the world, especially since the 90s, and who gained visibility and recognition abroad (Anthes 2009). Moreover, Durham is recognized as a contemporary artist proper – without his Cherokee identity necessarily been mentioned (and he never participates in

⁹ Durham made an installation, called "Caliban Codex" (1991) (based in Shakespeare character) which clearly demonstrate the ambiguous relationship Indians (As colonised people), have with the western culture: they possess and is possessed by it.

shows where the basis of the invitation is ethnic identity). It seems to me that there is another way to look at the artist's situation, who claims to be a "homeless orphan". There is no way to be a Cherokee within what is generally understood as geographic "frontiers" (nor social communal ones, nor, because of the American 'Narrative', discursive or cultural ones). He has stressed, with disillusioned sadness, that there is no more Cherokee lands in the USA, nor community Cherokee proper (see Papastergiadis *et. al* 1996¹⁰). His 'homelessness' (beyond which some saw a "poetics of dislocation" and a "trauma", Fisher 2009) starts at this point, but more importantly, he is just engaging the place where he is – not simply as a "citizen of the world" as he is coined, but as a 'participant' *of the place, the situation, where he finds himself*, being faithfully – though he says he wishes he could detach himself from it – to this 'culture' but most of all to himself, that is, as he stresses, to his being a "human being" using his intellectuality and being engaged in those important dialogues happening around him. This implies being able to stand as himself – and practice his art with his own approach, as well as necessarily engaging the existing (political) situation¹¹. These aspects are also what makes him, as his public has always perceived, an artist who cannot be categorised, and, above all, a generous artist.

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¹⁰ Beside, this is obvious in any type of history books, though not especially beyond the romanticism or sentimentality of most of them.

¹¹ I would like also to stress the fact that, being an artist and a human being, he of course has his own poetics which I did not mention here (it could be summarised as a poetics of "interruptions").

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