

ON CLASS RESERVE



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Jimmie Durham

Interviewed by Susan Canning

Born in Oklahoma in 1940, Jimmie Durham is a Native American sculptor, performance artist, writer, and political activist. Utilizing the languages of archaeology, ethnography, and history, disciplines that institutionalize the Indian, Durham's sculptures and performances comment upon the consumption of Native American culture. In his 1985 installation, On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian, Durham parodied museum displays with his fabricated and found objects, packaged as "sociofacts" and "sciencefacts," upending the comforting image of the Noble Savage. For Durham's 1989 exhibition, "The Bishop's Moose and the Pinkerton Men," shown at Exit Art in New York, the artist recycled found objects and his own carvings into an intercultural form that he terms "neo-primitive, neo-conceptual." A Certain Lack of Coherence, a collection of Durham's artistic and activist writings, was recently published. Durham has refused to be constrained by categories of "Native American art," by predetermined boundaries of artistic or intellectual endeavor, or by comforting definitions of the role of the artist, the native, or the citizen. He has for some years lived primarily outside the United States, and now is based in Belgium, where this 1990 interview was conducted.

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Susan Canning: I know from your background that you have been involved with the Native American church and the AIM (American Indian Movement) and have taken an activist role in these groups. At the same time you have been a producer of art. What do you think is the role of an artist as activist and the relationship between political activism and art?

Jimmie Durham: I am really very confused about it. What I think I think is this: there is a cultural construct for art works that is the power apparatus, the apparatus that performs culturally. It doesn't perform by decrees. We are all oppressed and repressed by cultural means primarily. So it seems a reasonable way to attack the machine. But I don't do art so that I can screw the system. I do art because I do art. Because somewhere in your life, usually when you are a little kid, you become an artist without knowing what that means. Then you have to figure out how to do it responsively.

Canning: So it's not really subversion that you are after?

Durham: It's subversion that I'm after, absolutely. But I don't do art to be subversive. I would want to be the same subversive person no matter what I did. If I was a carpenter, I would want to be just as subversive. And it seems to me that's a responsibility we all have because there is this big old thing that is oppressing us. Why would you not work against it?

Canning: You speak of it as a responsibility. But the traditional definition of responsibility is to do what you are supposed to do, not to be subversive.

Durham: Well, obviously I wasn't trained that way. My family taught me to be a militant. Because we are against the United States, the United States is against us. So that was my first level of knowledge of the world, to be against the United States. Then when I got older, I could put it in more sophisticated terms.

Canning: So your background is one of resistance from the very beginning. Do you necessarily have to be outside of it to oppose it, or can you be inside to see how the system works?

Durham: I think the more that I participate in the world, the better I know ways that I might be subversive. When I was a

teenager, I was a Cherokee activist. I was a naive resister. I didn't know very well how to resist. I didn't know what to resist. Things were in overly simplified terms for me. As I get older and more experienced out in the world, I think how to be more subversive when things come up.

Canning: One of the tactics of the avant-garde is sabotage; do you find it necessary to have a guerrilla mentality?

Durham: I think it's necessary, but in the art world, we artists do one of two things. We get too wrapped up in the art world exclusively and everything centers around our lives as artists, or we take our art out onto the streets and don't deal with the art world, don't deal with ourselves as artists that way. Both of those seem too limited to me. One of the things I hate about art is that it is so exclusive. It keeps itself very tight. Art has to refer to art to get seen. One way or another, that's what we always have. So any art that makes it is art that refers to other art. It's a closed system. It's a closed system maybe even more now that it pretends not to be a closed system. I think that it's more closed in a certain way.

Canning: Addressing the relationship between culture, nationality, colonialism, and power, you have written, "There is no Western culture but a power structure that pretends to be Western culture." What do you mean by this?

Durham: We tend to think that European culture is something that is there, but especially in the colonies, like the United States, Canada, all of Latin America, what we call modern culture, the dominant culture, we pretend has some organic roots in Europe, that it comes organically from European culture, that there is something bad about Europeans that made this dominant culture dominant. But it's not true, I don't think. I've lived in Europe and the people in the Alps, for example, are not part of that culture and that culture does not come from their culture. It really is an apparatus. It really is a machine. It does not evolve from some people and it does not belong to some people. It is not the "culture of the American people," it's just not there. It's something that is put onto people and everybody is alienated from it, everybody has to figure out how to

struggle against it. Or you slash your wrists, or you become super alienated...

Canning: Or you make art?

Durham: Or you make art.

Canning: The critic Maureen Sherlock speaks of the machine of late modern capitalism and how it uses certain strategies, for example the language of capitalism, and how such a strategy has become so naturalized in our way of acting and being that it becomes a way of thinking. The point she makes is that everyone plays into it, whether they know it or not. Everyone still wants to participate, even though they are raging against it. That seems to be a dichotomy of some sort.

Durham: I think it's a necessary dichotomy. I think we have to agree to be confused about it. Because that system does control the world. It is the world. We can't afford to exclude ourselves from it. We have to be part of that world to be effective and because it's the world. I don't want to retire in any sense. I moved to Cuernavaca because I couldn't afford to live in New York. But I am not hiding in Cuernavaca. I write for publications in London and New York and I am very active in Mexico. I would feel the same way if I lived in New York. I would want to deal with Mexico, I would want to have a discourse with whatever is out there, everything that is out there.

Canning: This brings me then to the issue of language. Your most recent work, and your writing as well, deals a lot with the issue of language. First, do you have to know the language to subvert it? You have said before that you speak the language (English) well.

Durham: I'm very proud of that. For years and years I read the dictionary every morning with breakfast, so I know English very well. It's something that I learned on purpose and I'm proud of it.

Canning: Were you raised in the Cherokee language?

Durham: Cherokee and English, but Cherokee was the language that we used for ourselves. I didn't go to school much, so I didn't get terribly indoctrinated into what English was. We were able to resist that.

Canning: One of the things about studying another language is that when you perceive it as a system and you understand how it works, it leads you to understand how the people who use that language think.

Durham: I think that's absolutely true. What's always impressed me about American English is how manipulative it is. It has a way of pretending communication when most of the time it's manipulation and not communication, to get people to do something, to get people to buy something, to get people to believe something.

Canning: Do you think it is to get people to believe something or to think that they believe something?

Durham: Yeah, that's it. To hope that they'll believe it so they'll buy it. In fact, to make sure that they don't really believe it so that they are still alienated. People, white folks, used to come and ask us about our place, because we lived in the woods. We knew the woods because we were from the woods. And they wanted to know the names of things. A lot of times we didn't really know the names of things, but no matter what, all you could tell them about a particular tree or flower, its species, its habits, everything, couldn't satisfy them. They wanted the name of it, and if you could tell them any name, they were satisfied. No matter if you told them these are its habits, it was the name they wanted. It was a pretend knowledge that you would know something by calling it a fir tree. Of course, in what sense is it a fir tree? Where's the firmness of the tree? If you know about a fir tree then you know it. The fact that it has an English name, with a long history, that's kind of esoteric knowledge that you don't really need unless you are studying word origins. Then you're studying the word, not the tree.

Canning: You wrote: "Understanding is the consumer product of your society. Once you've bought some understanding it's only natural to turn around and make a profit from it, psychological, economic or both." My question is: is it really understanding or is it confusion?

Durham: There is a way that we are taught to use knowledge. People say: "Knowledge is power." What a crazy concept. It's a

dumb concept, actually. What are you talking about with “power”? Why is that word used? Why don’t we use something more complex, another word. Why do we have to have this slogan?

Canning: Going back to the idea of language, you know that language is a tool to get there, so how can you negotiate within that system without doing the same thing yourself?

Durham: I don’t think there is a constant answer and I don’t think there is a clear answer. I am really confused. It’s the time to be confused, but not in an inactive way: to see there are great complexities and to investigate more, to investigate more constantly, to not be satisfied with some little piece of something that makes you feel like you are powerful, that you’ve got the answer so you can move ahead. That’s very dangerous.

Canning: In a sense, confusion has been marginalized in our society. Insanity or psychotic behavior is seen as being not rational, simply because rational is the way. It seems to me that confusion may be the subversive way of doing it.

Durham: I think so and for me it’s a necessary subversion, because, when you start not knowing how you bought something, or how you were influenced by their crap, that’s a dangerous situation because then you are moving without knowing a part of yourself that’s doing the moving. A piece of you is acting that you don’t even know about and these are dangerous times to act that way. So it seems that if one sees a responsibility with helping to subvert, then you have to constantly do a kind of self-analysis. How am I infected today? How do I get rid of that infection?

Canning: You speak of the “primitive” as a code or convention for interpretation. Do you want to talk about how you relate that to your work?

Durham: I think there is a European premise of the primitive which is different from the colonial, say, for example, Australia or the United States, these are colonial powers to me. Europe has a primitivism that it got by being conquered by Rome. But the colonies got their idea of “primitivism” because they carried out that ideal. Then they took over someone’s land and killed

those people in the process and pretended that they were not doing it. Which is a funny kind of set-up for a human being to deal with. So they were the psychopaths. The Europeans that came here were nuts, how could they not be? They were conquered by Rome and then they were conquered by the Church, they were tortured and burned for 1500 years. Every time they raised their hands to do something different, they got their guts cut out. They got it in school, they got beat up with a stick. Of course, you’re going to be crazy after two thousand years of that. So then you come and take someone else’s land, kill them, set up shop, and pretend that you didn’t do it. So America has an idea of the primitive that’s an absolutely operative idea, that actually drives the United States, and its idea has to be that it owns not only the primitives but primitivism. The United States has to see itself as the only expert on the savages because it must own the savages. Because it has to legitimize its existence. Not once but continuously, it has to legitimize its existence, because it continues to be a colonial set-up. But it can’t admit it, because it would spoil the whole thing. That’s why Native Americans are invisible. We are not invisible because we are a tiny minority. That’s why our history is invisible, because the United States has to continually defend its existence and in that process it has to have consumed us. We have to be its heritage in a very serious intellectual and operative way.

I think the European concept of the primitive that this comes from is still operative and I think it’s very close to the premise “women” and “artist”—different people who if they are allowed into the discourse would seriously fuck up the discourse. You have to subvert those people and their activities in order to keep the discourse rolling in the direction that it’s supposed to be rolling. We don’t think of artists that way. We don’t think of the premise “artist” as being deliberately kept out of the discourse by the machinery. Yet it is very much and in similar ways as to “Indian” and “women” as premises. There you have a pedestal that you are put upon and admired and the pedestal is to keep you away from real life. And you are not really admired. Really you are hated, feared, abused. But you’re given these little silly rewards as compensation that you’re supposed to be

satisfied with and they keep pushing. Like for example in the '50s where they pushed housewifery and how nice it was for ladies to sit around the coffee table, drinking coffee, being silly non-persons outside of the society. And they really sold this, locking that in. But that's what happens with art too. An artist is taught continuously that art really doesn't have any function in society, that art is very mysterious and then the rewards that you are offered are fame and fortune. Those are not legitimate rewards as or for human society. Your reward has got to be that you can function within society. That's the reward. If you as a woman are set up as a housewife with all the nice housewife things but then you can't function in the world, then what the hell kind of reward is that? Indians are the same way. People pretend to love us and they put us up on the pedestal of noble savage. The whole purpose is to exclude us because the discourse has to exclude us because we're going to say, "You're not legitimate" to the machine. That would be our intervention, that is our intervention—"You're not real, you're not legitimate," whereas the United States always has to say, "We are the most real, we are the most legitimate."

Canning: I was thinking, while you were talking, of commercials...that commercials train people to desire those nice things but at the same time they take away your identity while locking you into it, because then you are in debt.

Durham: And psychologically insecure, because you've got to have the next thing to keep functioning well, otherwise you can't in this society. If you watch the commercials about the right underarm deodorant, you might laugh at it, but then you start getting insecure. You might need that underarm deodorant... that's my problem, out there...not enough underarm deodorant.

Canning: But it seems that what you're involved with is an inversion of that. In the sense of using the language to invert it, to reveal the codes of the sexual, racial dispossession.

Durham: I try to do that, but in general it's a losing battle for me. Maybe I don't really expect to win any battles. Maybe I expect to win a few points here and there, to contribute my little piece to a bigger thing, but it's very hard because the system is

so closed. Every time I do a show in New York, I get the most asinine things said...Indians don't do what I just did, or Indians shouldn't do what I just did. I did really ironic things, like "On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian," I mean crazy obvious things. Quite a few people thought it was on loan from the Museum of the American Indian and they were not dumb people.

Canning: About this idea of "On Loan" and how people thought that it was real, your work addresses the whole ethnographical and anthropological aspect of the "Indian." Don't people realize it's a parody?

Durham: Often people don't because we are taught not to be very subtle and parody takes a kind of subtle understanding. As well, people don't expect it from us, the Indians. People expect "the Noble Savage" in one way or another. They expect it and they want it. They don't want us to act bad. They want us to really reflect the stereotype. The same thing happens with performances that I've done. People reacted to them straightforwardly. It's because, as an Indian, people need for me to fit their stereotype. And the stereotype is that we are Noble Savages in the sense that we are very straightforward, very stoic, that we love America, that we are simpleminded, and that we are very spiritual, which, in real language, means that we are not sophisticated. We're kind of an animal that speaks only in a certain way that this kind of animal would speak. We're not supposed to be able to say normal things, or unusual things. We only say what we say in movies or books, the culture of the stereotype. We say stereotypical things.

Canning: You talk in your writings of history as a series of discontinuous facts and the significance is in the ordering.

Durham: I have come to think of history as a dysfunctional idea. There cannot possibly be history. What would we know of history as we think of history? As history is knowing what happened in the past, that's what we think history is. How could we possibly know what happened in the past? My mother just died, and I was with my three sisters and we were talking about our childhood and the things that we remembered in the past.

It was as though we were from different families. We grew up in the same house. We supposedly went through the same historical periods, but we didn't. And if each of us wrote the history of those years in that house, it would be different, really, really, different. What the hell do we mean by history? It's a new concept. One of the things that anthropologists have always been getting on our case about is that we didn't have a sense of history before the colonizers came to civilize us and I think that's true. It's pretty dumb to have an idea of history. We have to think more complexly than to think that we can know the past, because we can't. We believe whatever our situation causes us to believe and it may or may not be true. It may or may not be *the* really important things that happened. At the same time, because there is such an authoritative version of history, it's great fun to pull out other things that are hidden and left out and find a way to put them forward without making a countersign to their sign, because their signs are there. And I can't very effectively put up a countersign, I can't continually add footnotes to historical process because it is there, it is authorized history, and not much is going to change that.

Canning: Isn't it really a question of strategies?

Durham: Absolutely. I think one of the dangers of being artists at any time, we are taught that as artists, we create. That's a really dumb idea. Notions of creativity ought to be thrown out. I was raised differently, I come from a different culture. I'm an outsider who sneaks in, who continues to sneak in. I can't see that it's helpful. It's not possible for me to sit in my studio and make some art. Of course I can do that, I have skills, I can make things all day long. Then to just make things in my studio and not put them out in the world is an asinine idea. You're asking the world to speak your language and the world doesn't speak your language. It's just as if I insisted we conduct this interview in Cherokee. What would that do?

Canning: It would be a very one-sided conversation.

Durham: Exactly right. So I think it only makes sense that an artist makes his or her art in society, not in a studio. That makes it strategic all of the time. It always has to be strategic.

And to me what's mysterious is that we don't think that. We still think of ourselves as *the* creative people. We make our things and then we force them on the world and if they are great things the world will then appreciate them. That's an infantile idea that we've been given as the role that the artist plays. But if you say, "Here I am an artist, I am an artist in society, whether I would like to be or not," then you have to think of your work as being ways to investigate real situations. Ways that deal with objects and visual things primarily, not with text primarily and not with textual investigations primarily. Then I have to figure out what sort of things to investigate and how to investigate them. That demands a constant attempt at discourse with society. If I go back home and make something and then give it to the world and say here it is, I can't see why I would do that, I can't see what I would get from it, except I could sell it and get a little piece of money...

In the '70s, when there first became this fad called political art, this little category called political art hid the idea that everything else was political art also. The category said that political art was a painting or a sculpture that had a slogan on it, that's what political art came to be defined as and everything else was not political art. Artists are taught to be stupid and we have to recognize that. Just like the housewife in the '50s was taught to be stupid. We have to try to stop being stupid because it is not interesting to be stupid.

Canning: Turning to the discourse of modernism...On one level you are talking about what it is to be an artist, the tools, the language. But then there is also modernism and the discourse of the modern artist. Do you see your work as an inversion of that, in a "postmodern" sense?

Durham: I don't like modernism. I don't like what it's done. It's been a very oppressive agenda. But I don't think it should be finished with. I totally distrust the people who are celebrating its death and at the same time celebrating a new style which is recognizably postmodern. If we say that modernism is an agenda, postmodernism has to be a situation, not an agenda. So the situation has to include everything that the agenda did not include. The agenda goes away, therefore everything is there.

That's what the New York art world is saying that it does but it doesn't do that. There are postmodernist styles and there are enforced postmodernist styles, that's just modernism, that's just continuing the agenda. However, modernism can be very useful as a cultural tool for moving into the world in a better way. I think that Kay Walkingstick is a good example of that. I think her work is very valuable, because she's a very good modernist painter. And we as Indians need that. We need that as a way to free up things, in a way that my work doesn't necessarily do for us. And certainly the different Indian art schools that have developed in the last twenty years all lock you into a stereotype of modern art, of a way of being. They are very informative, these Indian styles. They inform people how to be Indian and that's very dangerous.

Canning: Another issue you deal with is authenticity...

Durham: It's a funny search, this search for authenticity. It's very funny in the United States with us. Part of the United States myth about us is that we are not authentic. Historically, Indians of the past are considered to be the only authentic Indians, but at the same time, they're not very authentic because they did not really exist. The myth says that the United States came to the wilderness, without any Indians in it. At the same time it says that the only real Indians are those they didn't see there. It's really a convoluted bit of craziness. But people need us to act authentically. People need to search for authentic things. Us primitives are the holders of these authentic things, this authenticity. Except of course we're not. It's a search that goes on and on for the authentic this, for the authentic that. It's another silly thing. What could they possibly be talking about? an artifact? a way of being? I can't understand what is in people's minds when they are looking for this authenticity. But we're given it, we have it inflicted upon us. So Indians want to be authentic, to see ourselves as authentic, especially for those who see us as authentic. It's very dirty, it's very destructive. So I want to subvert whenever I can think of ways that I might, the whole concept of authenticity, at the same time to try to call attention to how silly they're being.

Canning: Humor plays a major role in your work—it is ironic, sarcastic, subversive, and healing. Could you comment on that?

Durham: I think it can be but I also think you have to be careful with it. I have to be careful with it. Cherokees are very funny people, we're always using humor. It's really part of us. I think it's always been there. We're always making puns in Cherokee. We're always playing with the language. I think it also comes as a defense from what we've been through the last three hundred years. Like the Jewish people it's a survival tactic and that's where it gets dangerous. Because we can defend too much. So I'm always wondering if I've overdone it in a show. And sometimes I'm using humor very consciously and sometimes I'm not. Sometimes it just happens as a cultural thing. If it gets to be where things are too funny, where humor is too much constantly there, then it can lose its bite, it can lose its power as a survival tactic, lose any point to it. I think there is a way to use humor. I think it can be more subversive than a lot of other things.

Susan Canning is an arts writer living in New York.