

The Opposite of Snake
Surrealism and the Art of Jimmie Durham

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Twenty years ago, the artist Jimmie Durham described “opposites” from a child’s point of view:

The teacher said that black was the opposite of white, sweet was the opposite of sour, and up was the opposite of down. I began to make my own list of opposites: the number one must be the opposite of the number ten, ice was the opposite of water, and birds were the opposite of snakes.¹

Durham’s witty anecdote moves the terms of understanding here away from conventional oppositional pairs. Yet it does so less by abolishing binary logic altogether, than by setting forth an alternative set of oppositions whose logic steps outside mainstream assumptions. If the teacher presents a paradigm for understanding the world, then so too does the child’s own list. To an observant child surely ice is the opposite of water. Soon, however, Durham would learn that grown-ups were puzzled; they had lived with a certain type of opposition, inherited from their own teachers, who were taught the system of polar oppositions grounded in a Cartesian dualism of black and white. But what if there were no absolute opposites in this classical sense? What if this one model—which, after all, is only one abstract construct—were set aside for the sake of exploring other means for knowing the world, or other ontologically grounded relationships?

Without such inherited opposites, for example, iconic images may be seen as more fluid and simultaneous, more open-ended in their relationships to each other,

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more dream-like and less fixed to a singular pre-determined interpretation. The condition of relating one thing to another then would be open to fresh articulation and creative comparisons.

What is to be gained by setting aside this model of opposites is a suspension of the exclusive, unremitting, and often hierarchical relationship between two extremes. Durham's anecdote, with its youthful distinction of ice from water, reduces binary logic to a mere effect of temperature: ice can, of course, become water and water can become ice; they possess the same chemical properties. It seems hardly possible to construe an absolute distinction or hierarchy of value between one state and the other: can water be said to be more significant than ice, or ice more powerful than water? In terms of spatial and ontological dynamics, the inter-relationships between two or more elements may be stated in terms of spatial orientations, internal characteristics (essentialist elements), and external determinations (chance attributes). In a manner explored extensively in Durham's mature art, the writers and artists of the surrealist movement made a feature of such startlingly peculiar relations by placing two unexpected elements in proximity, jostling the viewer's expectations and purposely intending the shock of unanticipated relations.

Indeed, the prose poems of the Comte de Lautréamont (1846-1870), and later, the visual and literary work of the surrealist avant-garde, employed as an intentional device startling juxtapositions that defied rational understanding and challenged conventional assumptions. They did this in order to evoke pre-cognizant and almost visceral reactions in a manner Durham would exploit in writing about his childhood "opposites" and in his mature artwork. In the work of Lautréamont and the Surrealists alike, viewers were not so much addressed politely as an audience of thoughtful spectators as made to become participants in shocking witness to events and images whose "meaning" was elusive at best, and at its most obscure, something that could only be grasped liminally.²

In Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869), for instance, the eponymous anti-hero Maldoror may be understood to be literally "mal d'aurore" in French, which translates as "dawn sickness," or alternatively, as "evil dawn." Authorial intentions in Lautréamont's work may certainly be understood as stemming from the desire to elicit alarm and disquiet through his use of spontaneous and violent actions in the narrative. Yet even such prurient authorial intentions suggest the formation of a new kind of readership, or a new relationship to the creation of meaning. In fact Lautréamont's description of a young man "as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table" was embraced and often quoted with relish by the Surrealists. As a young man obsessed with states of evil and mental malaise, his texts were imaginative psychological investigations of nightmarish

visions, although I hasten to add that he was writing, in his brief life, long before Freud or the kind of terminology just applied here.

Although they differ greatly in intensity, the work of Lautréamont serves as a useful comparison with Durham's work because they share a basic desire to stand apart from commonplace values, and to understand in ways that obviate the need for exclusivity and power-laden relationships that sustain a ruling hegemony and exclude outsiders. Poetry and politics collide in the works of both Durham and Lautréamont. As in Durham's work, the unease that the reader or viewer feels is a step towards estrangement, a simultaneous engagement with, but abstraction from, the "real" world. This is a surrealist device, whereby the world as it is perceived—including one's own sense of self—is rendered strange and foreign in order to see it anew.

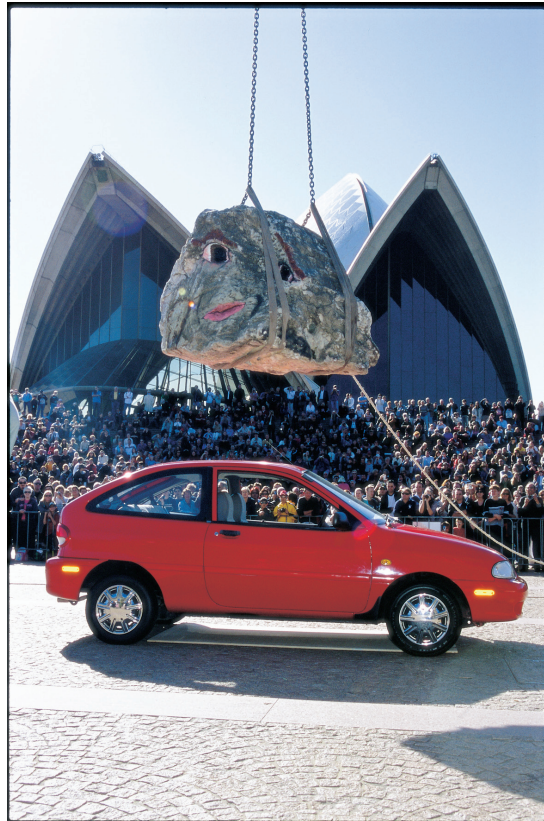


Fig. 1. Jimmie Durham, *Still Life with Stone and Car*, Sydney Biennale, 2004. Courtesy of the artist with the assistance of the MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

Durham's work *Still Life with Stone and Car* (Fig. 1) refers to the "high art" tradition of painting arrangements of flowers and fruits, for example. But it also alludes to these materials in their apparent inactivity, still and seemingly "resting" (to attribute anthropomorphic qualities) after a gravitational interaction. The stone, an important material in Durham's work, is an inorganic material but becomes an animate substance in its comic effect. Its painted face is at one and the same time a caricature, but a character nonetheless. Stones in Durham's work carry complex and seriously intended significance, merging suggestions of weight, natural forces, and time through sedimentation and volcanic activity. They point to notions of threat, stillness, and the connected spirit in all things, as understood in Native American belief.³ Among the many works that would further typify this connectedness, I would include *Elsa*, which I discuss below. Finally stones in his art also reference the earth itself by way of synecdoche, epochal time as contained in discreet examples, as seen in his work *Rocks Encouraged* (2010), which are petrified wood.

The car, in turn, is variously suggestive of manmade objects, of motion and movement stopped by the crush, and of a carrying capacity ludicrously overfilled. The silly face painted on the boulder personifies it, but the treatment is foolish, the eyes cartoonish, the effect ridiculous. And yet...the viewer pauses after laughing and begins to recall the *manitous* of North American tribal belief, the shamanistic practices in so many indigenous cultures, their mediation in spirit worlds, and the pervasiveness of the encounters with the unseen that characterize native beliefs.⁴ This stands in awkward contrast to the majority of European beliefs.⁵ A case in point, as applied to art, is the still life genre—*nature morte*, literally "dead nature." In Durham's *Still Life with Stone and Car*, the arrangement is not so much dead as residually containing a spiritual life force—hence, the painted face becomes the signifier of a characterful presence. In much of Durham's work, this ability to evoke the uncanny sense of the liminal, as in this *Still Life* that is animated by an unseen spirit, is part of his investigative process. He said:

Since moving back to Europe in 1994 I have been working with stone in various ways, trying to free it from the heavy weight of architecture and of metaphor.⁶

There is cunning as well as humor in Durham's work, with a seemingly casual use of materials concealing a well-considered and serious intent. In his own words, Durham says, "I never worry much about my own identity: I think I've been miswritten about regarding that."⁷ Are we to take him at his word? Or is he shape-shifting before our eyes? We viewers *are* conscious of his identity: every biographical entry,

art review and critical work extant discusses his hybrid ancestry and allegiance to Native American and First Nation peoples. As far back as 1993, Lucy Lippard writes that “Durham sees the world through the eyes of Coyote—the trickster, the Native American embodiment of all that is base and godlike in humans.”⁸ But this Trickster image perhaps positions him too categorically in the Native American frame to fit comfortably these days; he has outgrown the furry suit. And Durham himself reminds us that he has the same proportion of Cherokee inheritance as Robert Rauschenberg, obliquely pointing us to consider another well-known artist, but one who is seldom identified with tribal concerns. Ancestral inheritance does not equal one’s artistic identity. The fact that his political activism is well documented stands as a badge of political championship: in the 1970s Jimmie Durham was a co-founder of the International Indian Treaty Council, and its representative to the United Nations. It is important to understand Durham’s allegiances, rather than erasing them as insignificant. In doing so we bring a ground tone to an appreciation of his work, akin to listening to the deepest bass pipes in the organist’s performance, aware of their rumbling and the relational depth they add to the melodic dynamics above. Durham is an artist that resists easy categorization; although one may keep in mind his origins and early activist politics, it is best to approach his work without too many assumptions, allowing each work to be taken on its own terms, as evidence of thought couched in material encounters.⁹ In this way, the ground tone suggested above may be understood as the metaphysical resonance in *Still Life With Stone and Car*, with overtones—to extend the musical analogy--of subversive playfulness.

At this point, more detailed background information may be useful. Jimmie Durham was born in Arkansas in 1940, and is one-quarter Cherokee. He studied at l’École des Beaux-Arts in Geneva, returning to the USA from 1972-87. In that period, from 1973-‘80, he worked full-time for the American Indian Movement as an activist and political organizer. Since 1987 he has been an expatriate, living first in Mexico before moving to Europe in 1994. Now he and his partner, the Brazilian-born artist Maria Thereza Alves, live between homes in Berlin and Naples, completing residencies and projects, and exhibiting worldwide. In addition to visual art installations and performative art actions, Durham also writes essays and poetry, teaches and participates in conferences. In 2012 he had three major exhibitions: most importantly, his first major retrospective in Antwerp at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MuHKA), “A Matter of Life and Death and Singing”¹⁰; a piece entitled *Maquette for a Museum of Switzerland* (2011) at the Swiss Institute in New York, in which he imagines a European center dedicated to the country with various aspects of material culture in photographs and vitrines;¹¹ he also participated tirelessly in Documenta 13 in Kassel with a work in the Karlsau Park.¹²

Given this visible and very successful career in the high art scene, it would be difficult to position Durham as an outsider. Conversely, he certainly is not someone who would be considered mainstream in any academic sense. One could ask: is he one of the establishment or a rogue Trickster, a traditional storyteller or counter-current *provocateur*? Once again, the dissolution of opposites offers a more fitting description for him and his work: he is both and he is neither. His work is serious but humorous, his ideas perceptive and philosophical; but he is not representative of fashionable art.

Durham states: "I want to act foolish. I will stand before you with the sole definition that I am standing before you."¹³ It would be a mistake to assign the role of representing an entire culture to the shoulders of any artist. Durham would be the first to insist that he is more than just an advocate for Native Americans, and that his identity should not be understood simply in terms of promoting indigenous cultures. His own phrase "standing before you" requests a license to be himself, to be taken as he is, in full complexity and even contradictory characteristics. Foolishness is his desire, because he emulates the model of the Shakespearean fool who playfully offends but speaks with wisdom. In the timeless tradition of oral culture, Durham wants to tell stories that make us think.¹⁴ He says of his art, "I want it to be investigative, and therefore not 'impressive,' not believable."¹⁵

Durham points out that exile from native lands, emigration, and multicultural encounters also bear a cumulative effect, as a great many artists and writers have discovered in the past. That effect is one of estrangement and distance, which Durham puts to productive use. His move to Europe in 1994 was another means whereby the artist could achieve a kind of clarity in distancing himself from that which was too close to see clearly, or too proximate to limit a larger agenda. He describes his new homes, and more generally his peripatetic status as an artist, with typical wit: he calls his European base "Eurasia." With this term he cleverly suggests the exceeding of boundaries, a manner of excess he is fond of promoting. In this transition from natal land to "Eurasia" he seeks to move beyond his "old stories, wishing to "learn how to speak Eurasian" with his work.¹⁶ The wider references of his practice since the mid-90s find new resonance as well as generally echoing traditions of Arte Povera, Dada, and Joseph Beuys, among others.¹⁷ It is no surprise that multicultural references abound in his work, or that he intentionally speaks in many forms. Durham is ultimately a knowing artist, one who is deeply aware of precedent, history and culture. His shared intellectual territory with the Surrealists is not by chance; he has learned to "speak Eurasian" in part as indicative of depth of cultural knowledge that has the same origins as Surrealism with French/European roots.



Fig. 2. Jimmie Durham, *Elsa*, two views, installed at the Bridge of San Marziale, Colle di Val d'Elsa. Project for Arte all' Arte, 2003. Photo by Ela Bialkowska. View of the installation; second view, PVC tubing in the river. Courtesy of the artist with the assistance of the MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

In one of his more explicitly “Eurasian” artworks, entitled *Elsa*, Durham creates an evocation of the legendary spirit of the Elsa River in Italy (Fig. 2). It is constructed with various materials, including a hammer that she holds in her hand and PVC tubing that trails out behind her, almost flowing like the river itself. Is it a conduit, mimicking the river? Or does she rise as a sort of specter from the kind of associations we might have with industrial effluent pouring into water? Conduits are usually buried; is there an echo here of the Surrealist submersion, not only below “ground”, but below the levels of consciousness?¹⁸ The playful intent of the Surrealists included the banter and teasing of give and take, producing images or words intended to lead elsewhere, giving part of the visible but equally and simultaneously evoking the invisible.¹⁹ Along with *Elsa*, other works by Durham link indigenous peoples with conduits; his physical manifestation of these ideas feature tubing running across the walls and include *Gilgamesh* (1993) and *The Libertine and the*

Stone Guest (1996).²⁰ He says that he “loves PVC as a material...the unheroic quality of it.”²¹ In this particular case, however, *Elsa* represents the invisible made visible, rising from the water that flows both above and below ground. Partly in homage to this particular spirit, and partly in recognition of the many abiding spirits that are common to indigenous peoples across the world, this figure metaphorically embodies something mysterious and powerful in the river. She is strange, both funny and peculiar; she stands still in the current and bids us do likewise to give a thought to these forces. This use of the visible and invisible in *Elsa*, by way of the conduits, also recalls the kind of indigenous belief in the interconnectedness of all things, as already mentioned, linking but over-spilling boundaries.

The issue of “primitivism”—at the forefront of critical discussion in the 1980s and ‘90s—is also raised in appreciating the complexities involved in Durham’s proposed moving away from opposites. Many or even most readers will have some associations connected to this term, but let us consider how it relates to Durham’s work. Deconstructing that which is called “primitive” reveals the implicit and underlying assumptions of this term. For example, a thing can only be called primitive in comparison *to* something else, which must be “not-primitive”: perhaps “civilized,” “refined,” or “sophisticated.” Here we are, neatly returning to opposites

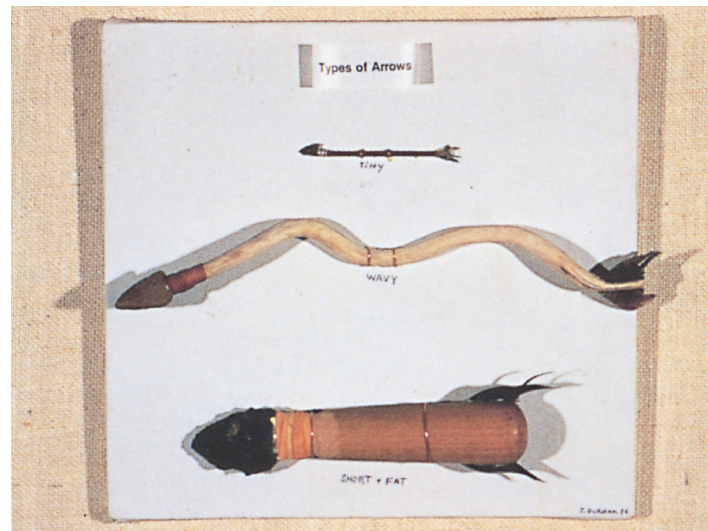


Fig. 3. Jimmie Durham, *Types of Arrows, On Loan From the Museum of The American Indian*, 1985, courtesy of the artist with the assistance of the MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

again, and defining something by that which it is not. Durham has already rejected these oppositional relations. And he would be at the forefront of critics of this categorical term, which seeks to suppress people, culture, ideas and work that stand outside the (colonial) establishment. For Durham, the challenging of stereotypes by means of the liminal thinking inaugurated through his play on “opposites” is at once a creative *and* a political way of life.

Durham’s parody of ethnographic collections, *Types of Arrows, On Loan From the Museum of The American Indian*, invokes both the taxonomic and institutional logics that sustain such oppositional relations (Fig. 3). The use of arrows as an artistic element may somehow be both expected and sanctioned by a claim to bloodlines, as these objects stand within the parameters of tribal identity. But in his multicultural mix, Durham also stands outside this ethnic territory. He becomes the imaginary anthropologist incarnate, ironically presenting ersatz ethnographic objects, offering us phallic and bent arrows for our consideration. The notion of “bent” arrows bears suggestive overtones and evokes both sexual jokes and judgments of waywardness and degeneracy, as well as underscores the “different” and outré. Durham thus pokes fun at traditional ethnographic stereotypes, as he loves to do. Since his earliest student days he has been sensitive to the misunderstandings of traditional ethnography.

One might also recall the affinity the Surrealists had with and for the art of indigenous peoples. André Breton, for example, featured a Hopi kachina figure on the poster for a surrealist exhibition of art objects in Paris in 1936.²² Similarly, Max Ernst had a large personal collection of Hopi kachina figurines and masks, behind which he was photographed in 1942 in New York.²³ Kachina figures represent spirits, for lack of a better word, that are in all life. While often configured as anthropoid in form, in truth these objects are more accurately thought of as “essences” or “presences” in living things—in wind or sun, in creatures, plants, and the natural environment, and in lived experience. They draw attention to the invisible in the environment, unseen powerful forces, and are occasionally used in education and storytelling among the Pueblo peoples. In a double reversal of re-appropriation, it is perhaps fitting, ironic, and in the best surrealist tradition, that a contemporary artist with partial ancestral claim to indigeneity reprises the work of artists of the preceding generation, and reinvents new forms of spiritual manifestation, evoking “entities” that have been misinterpreted or blithely claimed by cringe-making dabblers.

If we consider relations *between* elements more fluidly in our analysis of the setting aside of opposites, then we must consider aspects of the Other. One of the most prevalent topics of Continental (“Eurasian”) philosophy since the second half of the twentieth century has been the insistence on differencing, and the recognition

of the Other. From Derrida to Irigaray, from feminist theory to multiculturalism, recognition of the Other—and the respect accorded the Other *within* each individual as both a perceptual and cognitive action—has been of primary importance. This suggests that Durham’s work sits in the context of an ongoing and contemporary Continental discourse. And of course, this is one of Durham’s central concerns as well, once again linking him firmly with the Surrealists. Using creative actions, startling words and images, the Surrealists sought to discover the undiscovered, to reveal hidden, latent or subverted aspects of things that had been perceived in other ways. Difference was as important to the Surrealists as to Durham, which his art reveals. Even in the title of his piece from 2005, *He had said, “You’re always juxtaposing”, but I thought he said, “You’re always just opposing”. To prove he was wrong I agreed with him, but our friendship slipped away over the next few months*, he mischievously plays with language and with the various interpretations of “Head,” Duchamp-like in his play, and cunning in his title (Fig. 4).²⁴ In this work, both “heads” are broken. The nonfunctional (human) head is yet another resonance with Surrealist rejection of the



Fig. 4. Jimmie Durham, *He had said, “You’re always juxtaposing”, but I thought he said, “You’re always just opposing.” To prove he was wrong I agreed with him, but our friendship slipped away over the next few months* (detail), 2005, Courtesy of the artist with the assistance of the MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

wholly cerebral and overly determined. The Othering lies within the title, moving from the mistrustfulness of “juxtaposing” to the implications of a more acceptable “just opposing.” And we already know what Durham thinks about opposites!

Marcel Duchamp’s readymades are arguably closest to Durham’s works. Duchamp features the same dovetailing of the literary with the visual, the same symbolic meeting of flesh and machine, male and female, still and dynamic elements in his art, especially in the period between 1910-21. *The Bride Stripped Bare By her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass, 1915-‘23)* is directly relevant to Durham’s work. In that famous and extensively analyzed piece *The Bride*, Duchamp embedded years of thought, abstraction, and ultimately a kind of eccentric visual code in materials that were alchemical and unyielding. The work captivated critics; it was said to be “one of the most complex, mysterious, and elusive art objects of all time.”²⁵ If the ready-made art of Duchamp constitutes “gestures of revolt against accepted art canons, and in many ways the most self-consciously iconoclastic act that any artist had yet made,” as Golding sweepingly declares, this positions Duchamp’s work in a very similar territory to that of Durham, at least in terms of his iconoclasm.²⁶

One might also compare the Surrealists’ works to Durham’s. In comparing Durham’s *Thunb Datsi* (1985) and *Dead Deer* (1986) to Yves Tanguy’s *Divisibility* (1942), for example, we see forms that almost approximate effigies in each artist’s *oeuvre*, although they are separated by nearly 45 years. Durham’s works convey meaning by association, or more indirectly through the materials he deploys than by direct mimetic representation. While there is a hint of the totemic, especially in his work before 1994, there is equally something of the uncanny in these works. Yves Tanguy’s 1942 painting depicts a typical Surrealist vision—a bare, bleak and horizon-less place, with a form that can be read as a presence, either human/non-human animal, a spectral skeleton of bone and wood. Speaking of Tanguy’s work, Beate Wolf writes, “The combinations of disparate images and the strategy of suggestion...reveal a metaphysical reality in which indeterminacy and openness become the ruling artistic principles.”²⁷ This image of Tanguy’s shares a similarity to Durham’s assemblages. Feather war bonnets and teepees are not Durham’s reality (or at least not as direct quotations of his lived experience), but stones, water and wood for him as materials *do* have powerful connotations and work as layers of resonating significance, as do found objects rescued from rubbish tips, in a manner that can be aligned to Arte Povera. Durham is not a fetishist; but his *oeuvre* does move from an ethnographic and totemic sensitivity in his early work to an eclectic but carefully judged “poet-jackdaw” aesthetic, aimed at oblique cultural critique. Like the Surrealists, his creative acts are ultimately beyond rational explication; they are elusive and compelling in their own material manifestation and resist full explication.

Durham's embrace of the Other in his work is also a profoundly political act. Brian Treanor suggests:

The question of the otherness of the other is no more mere historical footnote; it is central to understanding ethical (the relation between the self and other humans), socio-political (the relation to or between groups of persons), and theological (the relation between self and God) questions.²⁸

One of the most enduring characteristics of Durham's work is its appeal to multiple perspectives. As Durham's words at the beginning of this essay suggest, the matter of looking through the eyes of the Other is at the heart of his aesthetic.²⁹ This is true whether one views his works through the lens of any of the three categories Treanor describes, ethical, socio-political or theological. Nor is this claiming too grand a context for Durham's art, since he precisely intends a multivalent quality to his art that eschews fixed categories. The feminist theorist and critic Laura Mulvey, writing on Durham in 1996, noted:

Jimmie Durham is a political artist, from the point of view of both the content of his work and its formal implications. But his politics also extends to exploring the relation between forms and concepts, including the ability of words to conjure up images and of images to convey ideas.³⁰

Durham's conjured images are multilayered and associative, and are not intended to convey a single idea or a one-to-one correspondence of signifier to signified. They are instead primary visual statements, made through and with the materials themselves, multivalent, "speaking" to the viewer in many tongues. These artworks position rather than preach, point rather than dictate. Durham's *a priori* position is his fundamental confidence that there are valuable insights in the perceptions and cultures of ancient, indigenous, alternative and marginalized peoples. A similar positioning often occurs in native stories; as every storyteller can appreciate, the laughter, the puzzlement, and the delight in baffling audiences are in themselves strong motivational forces. They keep the storyteller spinning yarns, sharing wisdom and values wrapped in "the old stories."³¹ Native American audiences, in particular, are used to listening to the "deep stories" in the tales they have grown up hearing as part of their cultural tradition, knowing that there is more to value in the story as the narrative unfolds. The sly wit and the twist in the tale keep the audience listening.

Durham's writing is as effective and challenging as his visual art; in fact, they are part and parcel of each other, inextricably intertwined as creative modes. He asks us to participate in his playful observations. He knows we know he is having fun, but he also lets the reader discover the subtexts on her own. Durham's essay "In Search of Virginité" addresses the question of "authenticity." The issues of "authenticity," judgment and truth are for him the basis of understanding his own identity as a reliable means of seeing the world. He would also refute the possibility of authenticity as an absolute concept. Truth itself is suspect for Durham as a categorical paradigm that is too rigidly defined and too inflexible to account for the nuances he so playfully encourages. Esther Pasztory equates the historically traditional with a kind of authenticity when she writes:

The western search [for the traditional] was for a pure and uncontaminated exotic culture—uncontaminated by us—that could be voyeuristically experienced. It is what the Native American artist Jimmie Durham calls the search for "virginité." The art collected, exhibited, and studied by us had to be similarly authentically traditional.³²

Rephrasing the question in reverse: why are we not looking at images of feather bonnets and tepees? Would it be more "authentic" to see artists deploying the iconography of their cultural past, replete with buckskins, moccasins and totem poles? Obviously, it matters how one defines "authenticity," and what the status of imagery politics is in defining a people's culture. Pasztory continues:

The art collected, exhibited, and studied by us had to be similarly authentically traditional. During much of the twentieth century, many westerners, often art teachers, sought to revive the declining native arts in commercial workshops. While ostensibly for the benefit of the natives, this obsession with maintaining their authenticity was a desire on the part of westerners to maintain an "other" outside of themselves...³³

Narratives of settler nationhood routinely included representations of indigenous imagery to create romanticized pasts that had been transcended. Thus the settler nation could delineate its own territory by visual distancing itself from its previous tenants. As Nicholas Thomas has put it, these narratives of succession repeatedly proclaimed, in a bewildering variety of texts and images, that "future is to past



Fig. 5. Jimmie Durham, *La Malinche in Tlxcacala: Do - a Marina, Cortes' Translator*, 1988-'91. Wood, cotton, snakeskin, watercolor, polyester and metal. Courtesy of the artist with the assistance of the MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

as settlers are to savages.”³⁴ Thomas’ point is partly that the victor writes history. His other point is that it is too simplistic to separate native art from settler’s art in a process of cultural exchange that moves both ways. Once again binaries prove inadequate. Indigenous art moves outside of opposites, appropriating imagery from colonial sources as well as reprising traditional references, in a wry, unpredictable and post-modern sensibility.³⁵ If Continental philosophy has taught us anything, it has at the very least made apparent that there is no moral high ground when it comes to Othering.

Undeniably, unshakably, Durham *does* have allegiance to First Nation peoples. In *La Malinche* (Fig. 5, 1988-'91) he revisits the historic figure of *La Malinche*, a *Nabua* woman in the Mexican Gulf Coast region, born in the early sixteenth century. She became one of the slaves presented to Cortez soon after his arrival. With a talent for languages, she quickly became a translator and interpreter between the Spaniards, the *Nabua* and the Aztecs. Commenting on an indigenous woman who is alternately seen to be victim or collaborator, the captive diplomat or the concubine, Durham’s

work shows an ambiguous figure that is corporeally empty but emotive, partially covered in snakeskin but sitting formally with a melancholic air.³⁶ Because she is historically both insider and outsider, is it any wonder that Durham selected her as a subject? As viewers we are cast as observers of this rather sad figure: she reminds us that “outsider” status (for us) makes us witnesses. It is a role preferable to “insider” here, which might be equated with the ambivalent role of collaborator in the sense of betrayal. This is a message we can discern thanks to the power of Durham’s idiosyncratic symbols and the appeal to a rich hermeneutic.

The importance of chance cannot be underestimated in this work. The Surrealists incorporated elements of chance into many aspects of their working practices, including automatic writing and drawing, frottage, lifting paint from a surface, guns shot at glass, and thrown application of paint or stones.³⁷ In a long line of artistic influence derived from this most quintessential of surrealist practices, in a direct line through Dada, “happenings,” and Beuys, Durham replicated surrealist actions with this last approach, in throwing his ubiquitous stones at a refrigerator, for example, in *St. Frigo* (1996). He did this in a manner that recalls Duchamp’s *Large Glass*.³⁸ Durham’s working method is almost always inflected by chance, whether through the happenstance collection of materials, or by some kind of action perpetrated on these materials. He revealed:

I don’t like to be in one place, but when I’m in a place I like to participate. It’s the way I like to work. If you’re walking around, as I like to do, you find things that are specifically of the place.³⁹

Durham would be more comfortable with the idea that he is an artist who does not propagandize, but rather one who causes the viewer to look at the world differently through encountering his work. Quite simply, he wants us to think. His serendipitous actions allow him the opportunity of chance encounters, and then to rearrange and re-present found objects. He uses materials in unpredictable actions, giving himself the opportunity to highlight relationships without preaching. Many of the Surrealists positioned themselves similarly: in using found objects or setting automatic processes into action, and responding to chance occurrences with openness, they enabled audiences to “encounter the world afresh.” Significantly, Mary Ann Caws writes:

Various conceptual, visual and verbal bridges between sleeping and waking worlds, the here and now and the distant and unimaginable, were each in play in their turn...Everything encountered for the first



Fig. 6. Jimmie Durham, *Mulholland Drive*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist with the assistance of the MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

time was, in principle, to be tried out, lived freshly through 'lyric behavior' (*comportement lyrique*): this was itself defined by its openness to chance. The surprise generated by any spontaneous action, free from subjective determination, was celebrated as the very essence of Surrealism.⁴⁰

This eloquent summation of the quintessential surrealist method of utilizing chance, points to the "bridges" created between modal states, thus assigning the artwork communicative status between the accessible and the (usually) inaccessible. The dream and waking state are one. Caws also notes the transition from that which is here to the distant and unimaginable. In other words, chance actions spawn the literally "unimaginable" (that which may not be imagined). Random actions and the aleatoric engender entirely new, original concepts that could not have existed otherwise.

Durham's *Mulholland Drive* (Fig. 6) illuminates how chance engenders the unimaginable.⁴¹ The spectral horse conjured here is reminiscent of the rather terrifying horses in Albrecht Dürer's nightmarish *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (ca.1497-98), which pre-figures death with its skeletal apparition. Like *La Malinche*, *Mulholland Drive* is corporeally empty, suggesting a presence that is there but not

“real” in a bodily state. The wing mirror looks backwards, helping the viewer (driver?) see from whence she has come. And the PVC conduit is an echo from past works, recalling *Elsa* (Fig. 2) and several other reincarnations. Its effect, as the artist commented about using PVC, is “unheroic,” to replace a torso, which is the home of organs, with a corresponding neutrality, not just emptiness or void, but the empty space that is filled by associations with effluent, with movement, a taking away in subterranean flow. Conducting effluence away is not the only function of the conduits: in a more metaphysical sense, they lay underground, unseen, and are an invisible passageway that runs both directions.

In Durham’s *Second Particle Wave Theory* (Fig. 7), the incorporation of outside actions occurs when a boulder is lifted onto a boat in the River Wear in Sunderland,



Fig. 7. Jimmie Durham, *The Doorman*, from the “Obsidian” exhibition, 2009 Courtesy of the artist with the assistance of the MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

England. At high tide, the river rises around the stone, and at highest tide “drowns” the piece; twice a day the river wanes and the crushed boat is revealed. In *The Second Particle Wave Theory*, the physics implied in the title are the forces of nature itself. The artwork exists as a constantly changing set of dynamic changes, put into process by the artist’s imagination. The boulder, again with painted “eyes” in a foolish face, looks out mischievously as it sits on a crushed wooden dinghy. The boat’s mobility has ceased forever, and the stone’s weight has overfilled the vessel, keeping it in place.⁴²

Durham’s close association with surrealist technique is perhaps most obvious in a work like this. In a considered and calculated manner, he treats the tides as a sort of readymade liminality: the boulder that sits with anthropomorphic character upon a boat that cannot bear its weight, is alternately covered (“drowned”) or revealed.⁴³ The liminal state in question is precisely the surrealist evocation of the inexplicable “in-between,” not wholly one thing or the other, certainly not the oppositional state with which we began this essay. Durham titled this work in homage to a scientifically



Fig. 8. Jimmie Durham, *Second Particle Wave Theory*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist with the assistance of the MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

inspired “in-between”; particle theory and wave theory share some of the same properties, but as paradigms for understanding nature, defy exactitude. In Durham’s material vision, “the stone in the boat becomes ‘particular’ and the engulfing river tide ‘wavular.’”⁴⁴

How may we interpret the contemporary practice of Durham, as inflected by the Surrealist tradition, and in light of his wry comments concerning forms and concepts? I would suggest that Durham is first and foremost a visual thinker. He sees in and beyond materials, discovering unexpected links and lateral associations with the stuff of daily life. Like a poet whose choice of certain words chimes again and again, across many works, the reiteration of stone and wood in Durham’s art, in contrast to found objects of mundane ubiquity, nestles in complex matrices of meaning. He gleefully evokes living relationships within material things and leads viewers to consider their latent energies and unknown potentials.

“Obsidian,” one of Durham’s more recent exhibitions (Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico City, 2009), utilizes the black glossy material as a transformative medium. This volcanic rock was once important to the indigenous Mesoamerican cultures, and was used in shamanic rites and the creation of mirrors. It was central in creating the world for these ancient peoples. *The Doorman* (2009, Fig. 8), one of the most remarkable sculptures in this exhibition, is fashioned after the mythical figure of Texcatlipoca (whose name translates literally as “smoking mirror”). Once again in the manner of kachina figures, the assemblage evokes this deity who is represented in Aztec art by his characteristic black obsidian mirror. The mirror reflects imperfectly, darkly, offering a shadowy vision of a haunting face, at once there and not there. Associated with night, night wind, hurricanes, the earth and jaguars, this deity stands uncertainly at times; it is occasionally represented with the right foot missing or replaced by a bone prosthesis, a reference to the results of a previous battle. Texcatlipoca’s presence beckons to the power of discord, mystery and strife. Durham’s deep knowledge of myth that informs this work arises from the years he lived in Mexico.⁴⁵ Yet this is an ambivalent figure, one that is also vulnerable, whose face is neither wholly one material nor another, like *La Malinche*. One of Durham’s recent photographic self-portraits shows him with his face obscured by stone (Fig. 9): it is fitting that this artist/poet/activist/storytelling elder shows us his own face as stone, his beloved material, the inverse of the painted faces of boulders that crush cars, airplanes and boats. The time frame for stone works so slowly, its weight so heavy, its place so “grave”—what can we viewers do but laugh? Durham sees himself monumentalized in this way.

Another commentator on Durham stated in 2006:



Fig. 9. Jimmie Durham, *Self-Portrait Pretending a Stone Statue of Myself*, photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Christine König Galerie, Vienna. Photo: Maria Thereza Alves

His methods are linguistic research and observations of nature and culture. He identifies himself as a “theoretical biologist” who depicts the behaviors and norms of cohabitation in various communities.⁴⁶

I have touched upon the cultural relevance of the “Obsidian” works (Fig. 8) and some of its linguistic references. But what of these biological matters? Could these be the “Opposites of Snake,” come crawling back to tease us into thought? The living creatures and organic observation of a “theoretical biologist” are perhaps the very same living spirits that imbue stone in his artworks. Durham suggests:

I want my artwork to be an intellectual project. I don’t see it as an instinctual or an intuitive project, but completely intellectual. I want to think about art. I want art to be a part of humanity’s thinking process, not humanity’s ‘feeling’ process. We already have enough emotions, enough feelings, but we don’t have enough thoughts.⁴⁷

Like the Surrealists, Durham encourages us to become attuned to the hidden, subversive or even ridiculous possibilities that we miss in the actions of mainstream

ways of looking. He believes that being outside these parameters of comfort is infinitely more appealing than being certain or harboring illusions of control. This in itself is a political act. It is a stance that is firmly based in uncertainty (however paradoxical that sounds), and confidently places an emphasis on multiplicity and contemplation as a much more *interesting* space to occupy than the passive acceptance brought about by closed, absolute and explicit statements. And this preference for the implicit, the mysterious, and not fully revealed, also echoes Surrealist intent. Caws writes: “Surrealism aimed above all to preserve a sense of the extraordinary, the unexplained and the inexplicable.”⁴⁸

Arguably, Surrealism is not a completed project.⁴⁹ One has only to trawl the art galleries, contemporary art museums, or university M.F.A. exhibitions to see that the concerns of the Surrealists are still with us, transposed in twenty-first century contexts. Jimmie Durham is a leading figure in this link to Surrealists of the past; in his rock-throwing, writing, constructing, jackdaw-like ways, he slyly occupies the same liminal, troubling, funny, and vexatious space as surrealist predecessors, refusing to work with received wisdom or conventions—like opposites for example—stepping outside of boundaries, and pointing to our contemporary culture with the same desire to defamiliarize and startle.

1 Jimmie Durham, “The Search for Virginité,” in *The Myth of Primitivism*, ed. Susan Hiller (London: Routledge, 1991), 286–291.

2 This technique of “bisociation” was later coined and expanded upon by Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964).

3 Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, ed. Joseph Epes Brown (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 115. Black Elk said: “Peace...comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.”

4 *Manitous* may be defined as, alternatively “mystery, essence, substance, matter, supernatural spirit...invisible reality.” Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 242. Johnston

also writes: “The manitous were just as much a reality as were trees, valleys, hills and winds...Kitchi –Manitou infused everything and everyone...”.

5 The reference here is to Judeo-Christian tradition, but could equally include Islamic or even atheistic beliefs. The point is not to erase differences in European faiths, but to position the weight of these overwhelmingly ubiquitous creeds against the minority of indigenous beliefs, which begin with very different perceptions of the world, and awareness of the spirit world present in all things.

6 Jimmie Durham, statement for the exhibition “A Shadow in Athens,” Stigma Gallery, Athens, 2005. As quoted in *A Matter of Life and Death and Singing*, Anders Kreuger (ed.), Antwerp: MuHKA, 2012.

7 “Jimmie Durham,” Exhibition at the Glasgow Sculpture Studios, April 16–July 31, 2010.

8 Lucy Lippard, “Jimmie Durham: Postmodernist Savage,” *Art In America* 81.2 (February 1993): 62-69.

9 See Anthony Huberman, “Stone as Stone: An Essay About Jimmie Durham,” *Afterall*, issue 30, Summer 2012, accessed October 10, 2012. <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.30/stone-as-stone-an-essay-about-jimmie-durham#footnote6992>.

10 MuHKA, Antwerp: May 24 - November 18, 2012.

11 “Swiss Institute, Contemporary Art New York, 7 March-15 April 2012, accessed October 2, 2012. <http://www.swissinstitute.net/exhibitions/exhibition.php?Exhibition=118>. It is interesting to note that, as an undergraduate student, Durham studied in Switzerland, and wrote his thesis on the material artifacts of Swiss folk culture and aspects of its frequent misinterpretation.

12 “Documenta 13,” accessed November 17, 2011. <http://d13.documenta.de/#participants/participants/jimmie-durham/>.

13 Jimmie Durham, speaking at the Serpentine Gallery, London, October 18-19, 2008. The “*Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon*” brought together leading artists and practitioners from the worlds of literature, architecture, music, film, activism and philosophical discourse to present their manifestos for the 21st century.

14 Durham said: “I don’t want to consciously put things in my work that are from my background. But I don’t want to consciously take them out either. I just want to be an intellectual; and I happen to be a Cherokee. But it doesn’t mean that you are a different kind of intellectual...” Julie Berthelsen, “Julie Talks with Jimmie Durham,” *Kitsch* (student journal), (Trondheim: Trondheim Art Academy, 1996).

15 Jimmie Durham, statement for the exhibition “A Shadow in Athens” at Stigma Gallery, Athens, 2003. As quoted in Anders Kreuger, “Stone as Stone: An Essay About Jimmie Durham,” *Afterall* Online Journal, Summer 2012.

16 Jean-Max Colard, “Jimmie Durham: Musee d’Art Contemporain,” *ArtForum* 42.4

(October 2002).

17 See Carolyn Christov-Barkargiev (ed.), *Arte Povera* (London: Phaidon, 2005) and Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes and Victoria Walters (eds.), *Beuysian Legacies in Ireland and Beyond: Art, Culture and Politics* (Berlin and London: Lit Verlag, 2011). It is interesting to note that in 1995 Durham was invited by Carolyn Christov-Barkargiev to participate in a group show in Rome, for which he made a work that consisted of a pile of rubbish.

18 David Lomas, *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 9. Writing about automatism, he said: “one finds there the problem of the unconscious, and of its representation, most urgently addressed by the surrealists.”

19 Lomas, 9: “Freud, at least, when in a cautious frame of mind, speaks of the unconscious as an inference made from the gaps or missions in conscious discourse, or from the roundabout form in which unconscious wishes manifest themselves in dreams or symptoms, but not as something knowable in itself...”

20 Jimmie Durham, *The Libertine and the Stone Guest* (1996), exhibited at the Wittgenstein House, Vienna. Ulli Lindmayr (ed.), *Jimmie Durham: Der Verführer und der steinerne Gast* (Vienna and New York: Springer-Verlag, 1996). Also, *Gilgamesh* (1993), collection De Vleeshal, Middelburg. *Libertine, (Der Verführer und der steinerne Gast)* is a performative piece, filmed in part in Wittgenstein’s house in Vienna. *Gilgamesh* is a construction of wood, iron, PVC, axe, metal details, and door. It was exhibited in the Stichting Beeldende Kunst Middelburg/De Vleeshal. Both works feature conduits, as does *Elsa*, and have been recently re-exhibited in the Durham retrospective at MuHKA, Antwerp.

21 Rudi Laermans, “Two Conversations with Jimmie Durham,” *A Priori*, no.9 (2004):173.

22 “Exposition Surréaliste d’Objets,” Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris, 1936.

23 As documented in Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), 32.

24 Durham’s reference to Duchamp in this work is obvious: the urinal is unmistakably a homage to Duchamp’s *Fountain* readymade. And the cracked heads (both of them!) are indeed juxtaposed.

25 John Golding, *Duchamp: The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1973).

26 Golding, 56.

27 Beate Wolf, “Genesis of a New World,” *Yves Tanguy and Surrealism*, ed. Karin von Maur (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 150.

28 Brian Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel and the Contemporary Debate* (New

York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 197.

29 If “aesthetic” is the appropriate word for intellectually considered actions and objects. Durham insists that his is intellectual art.

30 Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 155-56.

31 This phrase is one Jimmie Durham frequently uses in interviews. It is reinforced in most communities where the oral tradition keeps alive the antics of the rebellious character, while reinforcing the profound values of spiritual connectedness and a balance, or equilibrium, which must be maintained.

32 Esther Pasztory, *Paradigm Shifts in the Western View of Exotic Arts*, in *Multiple Modernities* (course materials, Columbia University) accessed September 12, 2010. <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arthistory/courses/Multiple-Modernities/essay.html#note-34> (my parentheses).

33 See Pasztory.

34 Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/ Colonial Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 109, quoted in Jeffrey Sissons, *First Peoples: Indigenous Cultures and Their Futures* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 9.

35 “As a visual instance of this, I can think of no better example than Ojibwe artist Jim Denomie’s ridiculous and wonderfully child-like paintings of feathered braves; the settler’s visual narrative is reprised and reclaimed in “primitive”—and laughable—fashion.” See http://www.bockleygallery.com/artist_denomie/index.html.

36 In Mexican-American cultures she is identified with *La Llorona*, the weeping (or wailing) woman.

37 Mary Ann Caws, ed., *Surrealism* (London: Phaidon, 2010). Caws writes: “For years, anyone involved in Surrealism placed, or rather, had to manifest, an almost unlimited faith in automatic processes of many kinds. To turn the alert, thinking being over to the illogicalities of chance would, it was hoped, free the self from its logical restrictions, into a new world” (49).

38 *St. Frigo* (1996), exhibited as a documentary film at the “Under Destruction” Group exhibition at Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland. Also documented as both a photograph and an artefact in Durham’s first retrospective exhibition, “A Matter of Life and Death and Singing” *MuHKA*, Antwerp, May 24-November 18, 2012.

39 “Jimmie Durham,” Glasgow Sculpture Studios, 2010.

40 Caws, 49.

41 Exhibited at “L’Essence”, de Pury & Luxembourg, Zurich, August 24, 2007.

42 Jimmie Durham, *The Second Particle Wave Theory (As Performed on the Banks of the River Wear, a Stone’s Throw from S’underland and the Durham Cathedral)*, exhibition catalogue (Sunderland: Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, 2005), 17.

43 Durham, 2005, 17.

44 Ibid.

45 1987-1994

46 Anonymous, from the Barbara Wien Gallery exhibition publication, *Jimmie Durham: "Elements and material from my atelier in Berlin's Grunewald forest,"* Berlin, April 28– July 1, 2006, accessed November 17, 2011:

<http://www.artnet.com/galleries/Exhibitions.asp?gid=424301160&cid=101291>.

47 Berthelsen, 1996.

48 Caws, 17.

49 Caws writes: "Surrealism has not died when one of its exhibitions can be termed—as it was on the cover of *Beaux Arts*—"The Revolution Usurped" (47).