

The Unsettled Life and Art of Jimmie Durham

A retrospective in Naples magnifies the mystery of the conceptual artist's work.

By Barry Schwabsky

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Jimmie Durham in London, 2015. (Photo by Eamonn M. McCormack / Getty Images for Serpentine Galleries)

It might seem surprising that it required a pilgrimage to Naples, Italy, to see a comprehensive exhibition of the work of the American artist Jimmie Durham. But Durham, who died in 2021 at the age of 81, was an unusually peripatetic and unsettled figure, and while his work was always

mostly concerned with questions inseparable from his American origins and experience, he'd eventually come to the conclusion that he could address those themes only from far away.

Durham was born in Houston, apparently, though he claimed to have come into the world in his parents' home state of Arkansas, where he grew up. That little geographical slippage is only the beginning of the divergences between the story that Durham told about himself and what can be verified—but more about that later. In his 20s, living again in Texas, he began making art, and in 1969 he made his first move abroad, to attend the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Geneva. But when he returned to the United States in 1973, it was not to produce art. Instead, Durham threw himself into the American Indian Movement (he claimed Cherokee ancestry) and then the International Indian Treaty Council. In 1979, he left both organizations to devote himself again to art. But he remained an inveterate organizer, serving in the early 1980s as executive director of the Foundation for the Community of Artists, an advocacy group based in New York. In 1987, however, along with his life partner, the Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves, Durham relocated to Cuernavaca, Mexico, and in 1994 to Europe, trying out life in Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, before settling in Berlin in 1998. During the latter part of his life, he divided his time between the German capital and Naples.

In Europe, Durham seems to have lost his taste for being a joiner, and his work began, with increasing irony, to question ideas of identity and community. For nearly three decades—from 1989, when he showed at the New York alternative space Exit Art, until 2017–18, when the Whitney Museum of American Art gave him a retrospective—his work was rarely seen in the United States, even as his European reputation soared. And his art became ever more expansive: For Durham, sculpture could entail dropping a giant boulder on a car—that 11-ton work from 2007, *Still Life With Spirit and Xitle*, did not make the journey to Naples—as readily as it could incorporate delicate wood carving or whimsical assemblages combining naturally found with manufactured goods. No one, perhaps, ever took more literally than Durham did Picasso's quip that art is a sum of destructions. For Durham, to transform a thing is always to destroy what it once was.

The exhibition in Naples, "Humanity is not a completed project," took place at Museo Madre, the Donnaregina Contemporary Art Museum and was curated by its outgoing director, Kathryn Weir. It was supplemented by a much smaller exhibition highlighting Durham's work as a poet at another Naples institution, the Fondazione Morra Greco. As the exhibitions show, Durham was one of those artists who could avail himself of many mediums and techniques, someone with untold abilities as a craftsman. Though he never made a fetish of his craftsmanship, he did not seek to deny it, either—that is, to pretend that he possessed a technical naivete of the sort that is so

often found charming in contemporary art, even if a kind of sly offhandedness was a recurrent stance of his.

The works on view in Naples included drawings, prints, photographs, and video, and despite the obdurate physicality of much of this art, a lot of it is *essentially* conceptual, intended to be more interesting mentally rather than visually. Whatever the medium, Durham's works often feature plenty of writing—and that's even aside from the wall-filling sheets of paper on which some of his poetry was printed out for the show at the Fondazione Morra Greco. The poems are available in several books—most recently, *Particle/Word Theory*, published in 2021—but seeing them at scale, on the wall instead of the page, underlined how porous the boundary really is between Durham the poet and Durham the conceptual artist.

But Durham's true *métier* was sculpture. He may have cultivated an art of ideas, but it was always in the William Carlos Williams sense: no ideas but in things, and in the physical handling of those things. He clearly loved stone and wood—loved working them, combining them, or just leaving them as found—and he loved both natural and manufactured objects. (And the more they'd been subject to the vicissitudes of time, the better.) Sometimes, he'd love them to death: He was never averse to destroying things to make something else.

Durham once told an interviewer that, for him, “the future does not exist. It may or it may not, we don't know.... But the past is absolutely the present, we live in the past, that is what the present is, is just in the past. So all of the past, wherever we are, is super important because it is now.” In that sense, the material of Durham's art—and I want to emphasize that: its material, not just its subject matter—is history. History is apt to be a bitter thing, and Durham's art registers that bitterness in full, but I imagine he might have been aware of an earlier poet's observation under the title “The Past Is the Present,” a brief poem in which Marianne Moore observes:

[...]Last weeks' circus
Overflow frames an old grudge. Thus:
When you attempt to

Force the doors and come
At the cause of the shouts, you thumb
A brass nailed echo.

The strange, almost surreal entwinement of physicality and feeling, bluntness and intangibility, in Moore's poem—but also the fact of harboring “an old grudge”—characterizes much of Durham's art. One always feels him caught up in an argument with an antagonist he knows full well is not worth engaging; an antagonistic energy coexists with a sense of weariness.

Perhaps the purest embodiment of Durham's oppositional sensibility can be found in his 2004 video *Smashing*. In it, we see Durham sitting behind a nondescript wooden office desk in a gray room—concrete floor, cinder-block walls. Dressed in a white shirt, dark suit, and tie, he looks like a quintessential middle manager or bureaucrat. Only his shaggy hair

conflicts with his assumed role. The desktop is bare except for a single stone, not smooth but rather jagged-looking, about the size of a hand. A young man, casually dressed, walks in from the front left—his back always to the camera—and lays an object on the desk, then steps back. Durham neither acknowledges nor even looks at the young man. Instead, he picks up the stone and, with a furious energy, smashes the proffered object—it seems to be some sort of animal figurine, probably a lion—to bits.

Next, he takes from a drawer a pad of printed papers, a rubber stamp, and an inkpad, and proceeds to stamp the top sheet of paper, then pulls a pen from his breast pocket and signs the document, rips it off the pad, and—with the briefest, silently baleful glance—signals the assistant to take the sheet from him. Once the young man is off camera, Durham puts the pad, stamp, and inkpad back in the drawer and the pen back in his pocket. The whole thing takes less than a minute, after which a young woman walks in, places a yellow necklace on the desk, and the same process repeats itself. Then another young man enters, this time presenting what looks like one of those name plates that sit on an office worker's desk—but instead of someone's name, it bears the inscription "estetica 2000." Same result. This goes on for an hour and a half, during which, little by little, the desktop and the floor become increasingly littered with debris from all the smashed objects (and some are a lot harder to smash than others). This methodical madness is endlessly funny and endlessly boring, and, like some of Andy Warhol's static films, it must have been made in the expectation that no one would ever sit through the whole thing. Only the artist's endurance would be tested.

In this piece, the various objects presented to Durham should be considered as offerings, as goods to be sacrificed. The fact that all these offerings to destruction are bestowed by young people might make one consider that, in ancient societies, those chosen as human sacrifices were often young; perhaps these random quotidian objects are meant to serve as substitutes, proxies, as a ram was substituted in the biblical story of Isaac. In our time, perhaps, "Management" is the name of one of the gods to whom the young are sacrificed, but its hunger can be assuaged by things in place of people. But why did Durham portray himself as the quintessential manager, or rather, what does it mean that he portrayed the artist as one of this modern god's avatars, and the destruction of everything as exemplary of their transformation into sculpture?

I wonder if Durham wasn't
responding to the art historian
Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's assertion,
in an article published in 1990, that
the effect of Conceptual Art "was
to subject the last residues of
artistic aspiration toward
transcendence (by means of
traditional studio skills and
privileged modes of experience) to

the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration”—that is, to evacuate art’s claim to beauty and any Stendhalian *promesse de bonheur*. Durham refutes this idea by means of parody: that it can be reduced to ridiculousness implies its falsehood.

This is not to say that Durham meant to promote an idealistic view of art. He always knew that all culture, art included, was involved in conflict, and that conflict can’t be disassociated from violence or its potential. That the stone he used to smash objects might have been used to smash heads is evident. It seems that the stone in the video is the same one that became part of a sculpture titled *Prehistoric Stone Tool*, which Durham also made in 2004 and is included in the Naples exhibition; in that piece, the stone sits on a simple white shelf, accompanied by a hand-painted sign that reads:

This simple flint hammer was made almost 40,000 years ago in the area of the river Seine close to present-day Paris. Of course, knowing so little of the lives and culture of people who produced this tool, it can only be conjecture as to its use. However, we can HEY! OW, OW, AIEE! STOP! STOP! WHY ARE YOU HITTING ME? PLEASE! STOP! OH NO! STOP! OUCH!



Installation view of “Jimmie Durham, *Humanity is not a completed project.*” (Courtesy of Madre Museum, Naples / Photo by Amedeo Benestante)

Smashing exemplifies Durham the deadpan conceptual absurdist. But his art can also be poignant, even tragic in tone. Unforgettable once seen is the larger-than-life sculpture *La Malinche* (1988–92). It’s a complex figurative assemblage (when shown in 2017 at the Whitney Museum, its materials were listed as “guava, pine branches, oak, snakeskin, polyester bra soaked in acrylic resin and painted gold, watercolor, cactus leaf, canvas, cotton cloth, metal, rope, feathers, plastic jewelry, glass eye”) depicting a seated female figure. *La Malinche* was an enslaved Indigenous woman who became an interpreter for the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, aiding in his conquest of Mexico, as well as his consort and the mother of his son. Her name has gone down in history as a byword for treachery—much like Quisling in Norway—and “Malinchism” is still a common term in Latin America for the prejudice in favor of colonial or neocolonial cultures over Indigenous ones. But this popular opprobrium ignores *La Malinche*’s


restricted agency, given her enslavement. Durham depicts her as a figure of mourning and regret, her body reduced to a skeletal wooden armature, her limbs hanging loose and useless. She is a sort of grotesque yet remorseful puppet, somewhere between innocent and guilty, whose true will is unknowable. Her pathos may not redeem her, but it might make us wonder about our impulse to condemn.

While Durham's depiction of La Malinche recognizes her guilt and abjection, he does not imply that her submission to power—a collaboration, perhaps, with what Buchloh calls “administration”—is unavoidable. Neither does he believe that the desire for transcendence, in art or in life, is at an end. Durham's art is full of magic, or at least appeals to the potential for it. The aspiration to magic is risky, since it can't be entirely rationalized, and if it fails (when it fails), the result is silliness. Nor can that risk be outsourced. The exhibition's title, “Humanity is not a completed project”—the inscription on a poster Durham made in 2007—suggests that our aspirations remain unfulfilled, but also that we remain closer to our animal instincts than we like to admit, and therefore to unrationalized ways of sensing, knowing, acting, and being that have enabled our survival to this point and may still be of value. Maybe that's why animals are recurrent in Durham's work, as subjects but also as materials, in the form of bones. Armadillo, deer, lynx, puma, and skunk skulls, among others, all occur as components of his assemblages; so do whale teeth, chicken feathers, snake skins, and the like. But all these things are connected to the most artificial, and perhaps poisonous, detritus of industrial civilization: The materials that make up the 2011 assemblage *Some of these people are dead* include not only its crowning deer antler but also PVC, duct tape, a golf club, found furniture parts, and plastic key chains, among other things. One senses a connection to the folkloric idea that these animals are all people, but people who happen not to be human—or perhaps they are simply not yet human, incomplete humans, and in that, much like ourselves.

The idea that our humanity is incomplete inevitably raises the questions: Who are we? What are we? Durham's art was tireless in addressing such questions, and in making them harder rather than easier to answer. But who was Durham? What was he? Those questions, too, are wrapped in ambiguity, and not only in ways he might have deliberately intended.

This was the third comprehensive exhibition of Durham's work that I've seen. The first was in Antwerp in 2012, and when I wrote about that show, I straightforwardly referred to Durham as being Cherokee. In 2017, I saw his retrospective at the Whitney, which I did not write about. But it was around then that I learned that Durham's self-identification as Cherokee is highly problematic. I knew that he had never been officially enrolled in any tribe, but I hadn't realized that there were people who, as Durham finally began to gain a wider American reputation, questioned whether he had any Cherokee ancestry at all. And his self-proclaimed lineage turns out to be unproven. On the other hand, no one has ever turned up, as far as I know, who could say, “I knew Jimmie Durham before he was Cherokee.”

Does the dispute over Durham's ancestry have anything to do with how we should understand his art? His own sense of that changed dramatically over the years. Toward the beginning of his career, he asserted, "I am a Cherokee artist who strives to make Cherokee art that is considered just as universal and without limits as the art of any white man is considered.... If I am able to see both Cherokee art and all other art as equally universal and valuable, and you are not, then we need to have a serious talk." He lampooned the German artist Lothar Baumgarten for using the Cherokee alphabet in a work, saying that it made him feel "appropriated and sort of cancelled." But with time, Durham put much greater distance between his ethnicity and his art. "I am perfectly willing to be called Cherokee," he maintained. "But I'm not a Cherokee artist or Indian artist." His lament became: "You can't lose your own identity. I wish I could lose my own identity. All of my life I wish I could. The problem is you can't."

I can't say that my view of Durham's art has changed much now that I've gained some skepticism about whether he should be called a Cherokee. But then art critics and curators are not necessarily in a position to decide on the veracity of an artist's claimed identity. Still, the fact remains that we see artists' work differently depending on who we think they are; the artist's identity inflects the art's meaning. Anne Ellwood, who curated the 2017 Durham retrospective, responded to critics of his asserted identity with the acknowledgement that "if Durham was raised to believe that Cherokee ancestry is part of his family history despite the lack of official registration—as he was—the question becomes whether he has any right to engage with that subject position." And she rightly concludes that this is unresolved. I certainly don't propose to resolve it here. What I can say, though, is that this unsettling of identity is close to the core of Durham's best work, and that if we have to learn to become more cautious about how we speak of people's identities—I would no longer simply refer to Durham as Cherokee the way I did 11 years ago, for instance—we will have gained by it. But whatever we decide to call him, "Humanity is not a completed project" showed that, even if Durham never managed either to shed or to credibly claim a specific identity, he was one of the most remarkable sculptors of our time. 

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