Jimmie Durham & Isabel Parkes, *Dialogue*
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Isabel Parkes: Watching *Songs of my Childhood…*, I found myself wondering what your early years were like.

Jimmie Durham: I had a very happy childhood. I loved my parents. I loved my siblings. I loved my cousins. I loved my grandparents. I loved everybody. We were extremely poor but nobody in my family knew that. I remember very well that sometimes we had beans for supper and nothing else, and my brother and I didn't like beans, but my mother said, "Can't leave the table until you eat your beans". Well, we had two older sisters living with us, and they helped wash dishes after supper. And every time they would come by our spots at the table, they would eat our beans. Supposedly my mother didn't notice that we were not eating and still the beans disappeared. When you get very old you remember your childhood too much, really too much.

Another story: my father beat my brother and I once because we were being very bad. We were in bed but not going to sleep. And my mother told him to go in and spank us, and to make us be quiet. My father took a stick and said, "You boys scream, and I'll hit the bed". So we screamed, and he hit the bed. Of course my mother didn't believe that either, but everybody pretended.

School was horrible for me. They teach Indian people and black people to be ashamed of themselves as children. The American south in the forties was not a nice place to be.

IP: We're talking about Houston, Texas, right?

JD: The last story is from Arkansas.

IP: Where do the songs of your childhood come in?

JD: I have a (*pauses*) it's not a talent, it's a curse. I don't remember any song completely, but I never forget any song or tune. If I hear it, I will remember part of it. I have one of those brains, where you-don't-like-this-song-and-your-brain-loves-the-song. It won't stop singing the stupid song. So I learned horrible Christian, bloody songs, and military songs and everything always because that's what you learned in school. These songs don't leave you.

I thought if I sang them publicly they might leave. But instead, now Maria Thereza and Kai Vollmer sing them all the time in my house.

IP: You've described your works in which you throw stones at objects as not destroying those objects but as transforming them. I wonder in what way what you're attempting with songs is not necessarily destroying or banishing them, but changing them.

JD: Wouldn't that be a nice idea? I never thought of that!

IP: For those who aren't watching this installation with an iPhone in hand, looking up the references of each lyric, what do you imagine the words conjure?

JD: I think when we, when anyone – but especially anyone from the US because we have such a strong, dogmatic sense of "American" – does something publicly, we are expecting the rest of the world to be like us in some way. We are expecting the world to understand us, which is

rarely the case. When I sing these horrible songs, I expect people to see that they are horrible songs. Maybe I ham it up too much to make sure that people get that. Maybe I should have sung them straight. When I read novels by an Italian, a Russian, a French person, it's not my life at all and yet I feel there exists something essential that I understand beyond the specifics. I hope that I can do that in my life.

IP: If we take this video, then, and think of its essentials, personally the words I remember include blood, war, ammunition. Are those the ones that evoke your America?

JD: Exactly those: blood, guts and death.

IP: Which are the songs to keep?

JD: The ones to keep are also quite sad. There's Woody Guthrie at the end, and his songs are either sad or exhorting us to join the union or something like that. I think many people in the U.S. – blues singers, Jewish writers like Philip Roth – do something about a certain kind of horribleness that gives us courage. I don't know why, but it does. You live through it, you write about it, you sing about it, you know about it in some way that is above the facts of it.

IP: The final lines in the video talk about a "lonesome day", and that tomorrow will be "the same way". You've been described as using a "deceptive casualness" in your work, and I think that the last line could be an example of that. Perhaps there's an inkling of casual pessimism in it, although I don't think you're pessimist.

JD: I think pessimism is like cynicism. We pretend to know things we couldn't possibly know. We don't know tomorrow. We might think it will be like today, but it won't.

IP: So when you repeat the line "tomorrow will be the same old way", you don't believe it?

JD: (*laughing*) Not at all.

IP: I'm curious about the choice of video as your medium here. I know you are a prolific writer and poet, but I wonder in what ways you see video interacting with the narratives of this work. Perhaps also, more generally, how you understand the relationship between form and content in your work.

JD: I started out my adult life as a poet and theater person. We didn't say performance artist in those days. We didn't know to. I did theater stuff, poetry, and I recited poetry publicly, too. Many years later, after I got to New York, people would take videos of me performing and they turned out horribly because I could see right away that the video camera wanted attention. If you're not talking to the video camera, it won't record what you're doing. If you watch a performance that's not done for the camera, it's really boring. In 1978 I got together with Maria Thereza Alves, when we were both involved in politics, and then she went to art school and started studying photography and video, and suddenly I saw that I had a chance to do video, that I could do things in conjunction with her work. We were both quite naïve in the eighties, and we thought we could make little videos and get them on television. Why not? What's television for except to show people's work? (*Laughs*) Well, it didn't work.

Still, I started doing a lot of performances just for the video camera, and although Maria Thereza doesn't like getting credit for it, they are as much hers as they are mine. I stand in front of the camera and do tricks, but she edits, she has ideas and she is the camera person. I love the idea that you can reach an unlimited audience if you speak to a video camera.

IP: I think you're right that *Songs of my Childhood…* is much more a recorded performance.

JD: Yeah. We rehearsed several times for it, so we didn't edit it at all.

IP: As a performance it conveys both immediacy and improvisation. And it lacks nostalgia, which I found interesting, particularly because of the color painted on the back wall. It's almost the color of a child's bedroom. Do you ever rely on nostalgia in your work?

JD: I hope not. I hope there is none, but I think – this is going to be a general statement, and, well, I've seen it in my life – people with testicles are more nostalgic than people without (*laughs*). It's not good for us. I am certainly more nostalgic than my family or more than most people, but it doesn't work in art. It doesn't work in writing.

IP: Yet it seems to me that memories and symbols of memory play a role in your work. I'm thinking of an installation that was in the Sammlung two years ago (*In the Air, long before Archeology*, 2008) that incorporated bones and scaffolding – both signifiers of time. It made me consider how you incorporate mythology into your work.

JD: Mythology is unconsciously part of our lives. We carry myths around even if they are myths we don't ourselves really know. Our family knows them. Our people know them. I don't think of it as good or bad, but myths are just something we possess. In this sense, I use what I have.

IP: Are these songs part of your mythology?

JD: Oh I hope not, but probably so!

IP: I'd like to connect this idea of myths to that of monuments, which also reoccur in your work. I think that very often mythology plays a role in the creation of monuments, or in their monumentality.

JD: I think the business of monuments in the Americas is quite different than it is in Europe. The mythology is the same, however, because it's Europeans who came to Peru, to Mexico, to Canada. They brought their monumental ideas with them. These were ideas that you have to put something in stone or cement or bronze publicly, which is charmingly stupid. When an idea gets to the New World it always is so oddly ideological. A case in point is a sacred place in the center of the U.S. called the *Paha Sapa*, the "Black Hills", where people have carved the heads of four presidents right in the stones of these sacred hills. What an idea! What an idea!

IP: It seems then, that despite the specificity of the content of your work, it need not be destined for a specific public. The *Paha Sapa* or these distinctly American songs are as accessible to a European viewer as they are to an American.

JD: I hope so. We humans believe there is something marvelous about singing and music, but it's just a freaky thing that humans do. All other animals get away with this singing stuff, everyone knows it's no good, but we have to think it's special. Not only do we think that, but we think that God wants us to sing to him. (*Laughing*) What an idea! What an idea! But we do think that, and if I am working, if I can't listen to music on an iPod, I whistle or I sing or I hum.

It's in my brain. It's just there already. There's something about music that really is ours, that *is* human. You cannot easily make a monumental song, because somebody like Jimmie Hendrix will take the national anthem of the U.S. and play with it. You can't very well monumentalize singing. You can't divorce it from people.

IP: Do you think that has to do more with the melody of a song or the lyric?

JD: I think it's both. And I think we put language to the melody to help language, to help us remember things. It has nothing to do with the music at all. You can put any words to a tune, and somebody will feel those words.

IP: Which connects to what you started out by saying: that you tried to get rid of these songs, but you just can't.

JD: Right, the music takes over.

IP: Yet the titles of your work are, by contrast, often directive. The title of this video piece, for example, is descriptive. It gives away your concurrent interest in language.

JD: Because I started out as a poet, I still think of poetry as my first love. I just can't make any money at it. I love language, I love words, I love syntax. I wish that we would all be more cognizant of how we use language, how it influences us and how it constantly tries to use us back. As a visual artist – and I think it would be the same if I were a musician – I constantly see how language tells us that we cannot think without language. And of course we can! Music proves it. Art proves it. You don't need language to think. What I like about poetry is that it doesn't take language seriously the way language takes itself seriously.

IP: I recently read that something you don't like about writing is that "it replaces metaphor with truth". Can you say more about this apropos of our discussion about language?

JD: I wish I could. I think this is a problem of civilized language, legal language, language of civil powers. There cannot be any metaphor because metaphor always has to be replaced with truth. If you write something metaphorically people will accuse it of being poetry. They will know not to take it seriously. Only what language calls 'the facts' are the truth, and this is certainly not true. Truth is not there, anywhere, and the facts change, as we all very well know.

I think contradictory things, and if you try to put metaphor into visual art then you are trying to put language into visual art, and art doesn't need language. You can use language in visual art – I try to at least – but it doesn't mean that the visual art serves language, or is a linguistic work. If you make a metaphorical work, it means you are not doing an artwork, but you are telling a story instead. You are saying 'this means this.' And art doesn't mean anything more than a Beethoven Symphony *means*, in this linguistic way of meaning.

IP: Still, some of your work – for example this video – shows that there can be truth in metaphor.

JD: And poetically I love metaphor. Linguistically I love metaphor. I believe that when we think, our basic idea of thinking is metaphorical. This round, hard thing is like a stone. I know what a stone is because I've seen a bunch of things like this. Well this is a metaphorical, primitive idea.

IP: A comparison.

JD: Yes, and I think that is the basis of our thought process. When we start making metaphor into true truth, then the metaphor is replaced by 'the facts', by truth in some strange way.

IP: What do you understand as 'the facts'?

JD: What does anyone mean when they say the facts? We think, for example, that there are Mosaic Laws. That God gave us ten laws: don't do this, this, this. Actually, when you read the

Book of Moses, it's a beautiful book. There were hundreds of laws! Don't eat pelicans, God told Moses. Don't eat little owls or big owls, he told Moses. He was crazy. He couldn't stop saying things. But it was a long list of what to do, and as soon as humans have a fact of what to do, we slip around it and start doing what we had done before, but this time with a different name.

You just can't control us that way. I don't think any god really wanted to, but we also think that physics says that there are two ways of thinking of matter: as particles or as waves. We think that this is a fact in some way. The only fact is that we have been taught to say those things. Of course matter is not any of those things: it is neither particles nor waves, we just don't have the language to describe matter. And that's pretty basic: if you don't have the language to describe this stuff, then your language is not good enough to serve. Every poet knows that our language is not good enough to serve. It doesn't do the job. And so, the facts are not the facts (*laughing*).

IP: Isn't it funny how in the English language we resort to verifying our truths with the phrase "matter of fact"?

JD: (*laughing*) Too good.

IP: I'd also like to ask what you're currently working on. I know you have a forthcoming exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery.

JD: That's all moved away and gone. My next show is in Livorno, and I have one piece to make outdoors. I want to make a scaffolding work for it, but, because it's going to be outdoors, I don't have a good excuse. Anything I put on top of the scaffolding can be stolen. If I put something very heavy, then kids will push it off onto somebody or something. So I don't know *why* I should make outdoor scaffolding and what I might do with it.

I still haven't quite done what I want with scaffolding. I almost did in a place close to Antwerp, where I was commissioned to draw up a plan in a boys' prison. In this particular prison, the boys are free on the ground most of the time, so I planned scaffolding that would go all over the grounds so that they could be up above everything once in a while. I also made it so that this extended outside the grounds, onto the street, so that they could go (*laughs*) –
they didn't take it.

IP: And what was your excuse for making that scaffolding?

JD: It's about what I like about scaffolding: because I'm afraid of heights, I find that if I hold onto something, then I am relatively okay.

IP: So it's really not a metaphor, it's a practical concern!

JD: Yeah. But when you're up above normal things in a city, you get a funny feeling. It's not like looking out a building's window; it's a little more freedom. It's a safe freedom for me.

I'll have a show in Rome in January, and I won't make anything for that. Instead I'll show two sound works and two silent videos. I'm having a constant fight with those organizing it all, because they want more and more works. They want to fill the museum like the Serpentine, and I don't want to.

IP: You've also collaborated, for example in your video work, with other artists such as Anri Sala. Could you speak to your experiences collaborating?

JD: It’s usually a mistake (*laughs*). Anri is a nice guy. Maria Thereza Alves and I wish we collaborated more, but we don’t get much of a chance to. Maybe if we had started out publicly collaborating we could do it more now, but our ways of making art have separated.

I love my work in group shows but working with another artist, they all have such silly egos. They’re all so competitive. Not like me at all (*laughs*). I love the idea, and I always think if we could find more ways to break out of the personality of the artist, we would be better off. Everyone would be. But we don’t often find a way.

IP: I don’t think we could be in a better place than Erika’s collection to see a group dynamic succeeding. It’s a collection in which there are no titles of works or names of artists, and where one vision brings objects and ideas together. Without wanting to put you on the spot, I’m curious if you have had the chance to consider the dialogue of your work with others in this room.

JD: I didn’t know whose work was around mine, but I certainly appreciated looking at it.

Erika Hoffmann, *from the audience*: Without the egos.