

Jimmie Durham (1940 – 2021)

He wanted to leave that hospital as soon as possible but not this way. The most generous artist in the world is not with us anymore.

Jimmie Durham is a most excellent sculptor. No one can ask very different objects to live together like he may, reuniting them into circuits of reflective energy.

He is a marvellous writer. In his mails he plays with words overtly, spelling them as incidents that turn them into possibilities other than their standard meaning, very much alive, still a bit confused about their becoming, joyful. Such freedom affects one's sense of language. He is an outstanding essayist who never lets words get larger than real, he always lets the living creatures resonate in his texts, including rocks and crystals and ideas. You don't have to do any special effects, it is enough to make the words happen and give them time. He is a poet.

Durham is an alchemic artist. He transformed all his deeply felt and justified rage, into a criticality that addresses us all. Language is a tool for communication, like a city or a brain.

Jimmie Durham is very localised. He started from somewhere the world considers its outskirts. He creates centres of the world wherever he stays. After a period of activism and diplomatic activity for the civil rights and the native American causes, he returned to visual art in the early 1980s. He'd make multi-layered works that present themselves as native American, nay, as white man's cliché of what native American sculpture might be, nay, as sculptures on their own behalf, nay, as existential reflection. In 1987 he started to live in Cuernavaca, becoming both part of an emerging Mexican art scene and of the international one, offering a Jesus to Documenta IX in Kassel that is aware of incoherence and discontinuity, a Jesus that is linked also to the Aue river in the park.

In 1994 Durham had to leave Mexico. He moved to Europe, the peninsula of a Eurasia that extends to the Americas. From then on his main topic becomes architecture, a metaphor for power, as exerted by architecture over men and rocks alike, but also an image of the divides we make and cannot undo, between nature and culture, between ourselves and ourselves.

Durham is clearly an artist from Belgium. His humour is typically Belgian and he lived in Brussels for a long time. The French too can justly claim him, that is, if Marseilles is considered French. Durham is present in many European art scenes, a bit like Robert Filliou earlier on, from Finland till Portugal. He is an artist from Berlin, where he passed away, one of his two last home towns, together with Naples. He is an Italian artist, the Romans might claim. He is also first and foremost a Neapolitan artist, as his presence proves, and therefore he is very much a European artist.

The photo is by Dirk Pauwels, taken in 1991 in Ghent, of a performance Jimmie did together with Maria Thereza Alves.



Bart de Baere

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