

A Friend of Mine Said That Art is a European Invention

by Jimmie Durham

Originally this paper had three titles, by which device I'd intended to show my own hesitancy to attempt a clean statement. My reluctance to clarity is not simply a way to enlist your sympathy to my muddle-headedness; in these days we are making contradictory demands on ourselves and each other and, while one might wish the demands to give up vociferosity in favour of articulateness, one wants to respect the bases of the contradictions.

Because our subject is what we hope might be some new internationalism, let us begin with some old questions about nationalism, for how might we imagine internationalism without it being among nations? Or do we instead imagine us all to be free cosmopolitan spirits? Even if we do, the authority in charge of permits and permission imagines nothing, so the question remains. We have a proper distrust of nationalism. Yet we often seem to feel a need to assert something of our nationality or ethnic background.

I will propose that history in this century has made a confusion between nations and states, so that when we examine any particular nation-state we find turmoil and falsehood. Here is England, made a nation-state by the invasion of the Normans (by which event it should perhaps be more properly called 'New Normandy', like 'New York', except that Normandy itself is the product of an earlier invasion of territory that was in no way part of 'France' at the time). In most cases the state has taken over nationality, as others have said, by terrorism, and it maintains its power over us by terrorism. Something is thereby put into place, into a vacuum caused by the state's activity, that we call 'culture', or 'national culture' simply because we have a survival interest in not calling it the daily effects of daily terrorism.

Nationalism, then, as a rationale for internationalism, becomes an anti-cultural starting point.

And, of course, we might better name internationalism 'interstatalism' in these instances.

What seems often forgotten, though, or at least elided, is that the nationalism of states is rapidly becoming a thing of the past, having been forced out by its own suppression of the histories of ethnic groups. It is not difficult to make the case that the various fundamentalisms and ethnic aggressions which plague us now are actually reactions against nationalism: against the nationalism imposed by modern states. The future looked at that way seems closer to the cosmopolitan side of our desires than does the present, but also more mean and dangerous. A postmodern medievalism.

Anyway, I don't see how we can continue to think of internationalism as though there will always be an England; at least not an England, France, Germany, US and Ukraine under and against whose auspices internationalism can be appreciated.

But I do not really mean to commit prophecy here, because meanwhile we are at the tail-end of a project, the state, which is still a living beast. We haven't much choice but to try to grasp the tail.

When we think of nation-states we think first of those which make up the mythical concept 'Europe'. It is those which make the essential internationalism that we have known. Thus nationalism comes as defensive strategy of one against the others, like Mafia families.

This internationalism is in the first instance competitive, like the Venice Biennale, and in the second, fearful and hermetic. Now Europe-the-myth attempts to recreate itself as a concrete 'community' wherein competition is more ordered. The current debate about who might be allowed into this community, and who might be forced out, exposes the roots of internationalism. If internationalism is a requirement for civilisation, what nation is civilised

enough to participate? Or, who can England talk to? (And how, these days, can the nation-state called Great Britain find a voice in which it may talk back?)

Our seminar is at the Tate Gallery; in the spirit of internationalism will the Tate convince itself to acquire some newer, funkier 'Elgin Marbles'? By asking the question I do not mean to condemn the acquisition of any older 'Elgin Marbles' by anyone. But simply, as a national museum, can the Tate decide that these days it need only diversify its holdings to speak to a more diverse 'Men of England'? It's not so easy at all for the Tate to cease being an English museum - what else can it be; an 'international' museum, a 'European' museum, or, worst possible case, a museum that reflects 'the changing realities of postcolonial Great Britain'? And, how could it *not* commit those reasonable crimes? The crises we are in are big and small; there is no proper voice for anyone, whether one is an artist, a museum, or a nation. History, and our refusal to face it, forces us all into positions of reaction, so that the reactions themselves become less and less intelligible.

If there are nations what can be the project of each? Simply to be, to exist? As Jan Hoet recently said about Indians of the Americas, that's not much of a project. What if we imagine a group of people who speak the same language getting together for general, open-ended discourse about themselves. Let's call that a simplified nation, without state terrorism to enforce it. What sort of ideas will our little nation say to itself? I bet that pretty soon quite a few members will get bored and become passive. Some others will, deliberately or inadvertently, say things one is not supposed to say (according to Italo Calvino's model wherein no-one knew one was not supposed to say that until one did).

Like the scientific theories about the first three minutes after the 'Big Bang' that began our universe, our theory must be that both terrorism and censorship, orthodoxy and 'nationality' itself, begin at the moment, at the next moment the thoughtful member must escape, if not physically then at least intellectually, to hold on to the little nation's original idea.

This exile then is the 'only true patriot'. What will she say to the other nationality when she tries to function in their city, their conversation? There's been no imbalances of power between these two neighbouring nations because we just now invented them, so the people there are sympathetic to our exile, and welcome her. At an official reception the mayor asks, 'What happened?' 'Oh, I said that glass is a fourth category of matter, and people become angry and afraid. 'Mais, c'est ridicule!', replies the mayor, 'Everyone here says that!' She is given a medal. But I forgot to say that her sister was also exiled; I can't remember why. However, during the ceremonies the sister noticed that the poetry of the host nation had to make rhymes of the last words in each line. She said that that was an invention of primitive militarism, having to do with primitive mental drum beats to call people into war. It was actually against the law to say that, but being an honoured guest she was not put in prison. Her punishment was more severe; no-one would talk to her. She became a double exile and committed suicide. Meanwhile, our original exile went around happily saying that she had said glass was a fourth category back home, and people began to get bored and would ignore her, so she also committed suicide and was given another medal posthumously.

Actually, we know that in the first three minutes after the 'Big Bang' there was an imbalance of power; so that the first nations meddled in the affairs of the other nations even to the point of inventing them, and inventing them in the image of their invention. But suppose my absurd model were true, what would be a possible excuse for my little nations? It could only be, it seems to me, their destruction. Destruction in the sense of continual change. One nation would exist only as a way of speaking to others, not amongst itself. Doesn't communication have the idea of change within it? Change is a kind of destruction (and, of course, recreation). If

one communicates only with one's self there's little possibility of change. (One may then become 'a very strong self', but what's that good for?)

All of these old little nations have bad histories and bad excuses. Any sort of communication with the outside, any internationalism, is perceived by them as death.

Do you see what I mean about the Tate? Some day when I have time I want to do a comparative study of Josephine Baker and Anish Kapoor.

Michael Taussig, in his book, *Mimesis and Alterity*, presents the idea that we set up roles for the 'other' to fill so that we can recognize the otherness (the alterity) that we want to be there.

The other then fills the role by mimicking our mimicking of the role and by mimicking us, by which we recognize ourselves. That is the third minute in the internationalism of nations. 'The border', Taussig writes, 'has dissolved and expanded to cover the lands it once separated such that all the land is borderland, wherein the imagesphere of alterities - disrupt the speaking body of the northern scribe into words hanging in grotesque automutilation over a postmodern landscape where Self and Other paw at the ghostly imaginings of each other's powers.'¹

We can say that this takes us to one of the multiple hearts of the new internationalism.

Not that we will by-pass nations, but that we will treat them as curiosities that lack compelling powers. By that phenomenon perhaps there is opportunity for discourses closer to our hearts.

The states will continue to terrorise us but we can see them as outside forces.

A new internationalism could be inside; that is, an intellectual project for a change.

What we have seen in the past few years in the arts is a kind of slavish little echo of the reactions against state projects by the general populaces, which in themselves are so belligerently anti-intellectual that it has been easy for the states to direct them. More artists from differing backgrounds are visible now, and the art produced seems usually completely predictable. I do not care if this seems an old and even curmudgeonly complaint; recently I spoke to a group of art students in Holland, and said that we as artists are in a severe crisis about what might be art at this time. The regular teacher thought I was scaring the poor young people, and said, 'People have always claimed that there's a crisis in art'. Well. There always has been, so why not complain? The current crisis seems more severe because there really is nothing to be made effectively, in the traditions of what art can do, and we are left with small gestures about the past.

I want to return to my friend's statement about art as a European invention. In the main I do not disagree with him. It is only that I am not sure about three of the words in the statement:

'Art', 'European', and 'Invention'. 'Invention' is especially problematic in our present crisis.

Maybe there has been an underlying idea that art was invented at some point, and certainly the art schools and art books give that impression simply because their existence gives a kind of history, so that all that needs doing is a fixing up, fine-tuning, or improving to suit the times.

Such an idea might be helpful in giving a general outline or description, but I doubt it.

I'll consider the idea of 'European' again a little further on, but 'art' as a given is directly

connected to 'invention'. One hears of people who love art. I can't make sense of it; it seems as asinine as loving children. The category is too broad, and it also hints at some complicity in entertainment, if not actual badness. Maybe it's a category for experts, in that experts make the category so that they may then get jobs as experts.

¹ J. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993

We all must have lists of art and of artists that we detest because they betray what is important to us about art. Yet that importance is explainable only through specific examples. We really have only individual works, for specific reasons to each work. If there had been an invention wouldn't we have had to have scrapped it? (Or perhaps now we must?) It would not, whatever it was, have been like the invented wheel, applicable to a thousand vehicles.

Gabriel Orozco, a Mexican artist who probably would not approve of being described that way, says that we cannot make thrilling art anymore, that Disneyland, the movies, or just Benetton advertisements can do it so much better than we can, even if it were a good project. By 'thrilling art' he means both the gigantism of Henry Moore and Richard Serra and the *mechantisme* of Jeff Koons and Charles Ray.

Not that I ever wanted to make thrilling art, but Orozco has thrown me into a pit. I ask what sort of art can one make, and strike from the list art that is instructional, confrontational (people would only pretend to be confronted), 'puzzle' art, in which one has only to find the answer and then one need not look at it anymore, intellectual art that cancels sensuality, sensual art that cancels intellectuality, art that attempts only the smallest ambition or complexity, art that tries too hard, 'properly balanced' art, and most certainly 'delightful' art and as I've said earlier, art that is simply gesture within the art world.

Certainly we cannot be making only that art which is necessary, as I've tried to do most of my life, because we are not capable of measuring necessity, and the world will not admit even the possibility. Another certainty closely connected to that is the almost impossibility of making public art or art with 'community involvement'.

Yet don't we sense that the times are demanding something from us? Something beyond what we can easily imagine?

So then! Is this a crisis or not? A crisis! In the eighties, more so in the nineties, we have seen really too much bad art in a style that we began to call 'international' just because the work was so predictably, so sophisticatedly bland; the blandness of smart cocktail party chatter. Didn't we always think it was about to lead somewhere? And aren't quite a few of us now trying to figure out how to do it a bit smarter than the next guy just because there's now a possibility to get into a show at the Serpentine Gallery?

Suppose we were not doing 'international' art, and were doing what must amount to 'ethnic' art instead? Entirely ridiculous and beside the point as well. Does that leave us doing art that has an accent?

That is what many of the 'Europeans' seem to think worthwhile. They seem to think that, as art is their invention, effective art is within a developed vocabulary and accent. They might wait expectantly for change but they're sure it can only come from them; we don't have European accents.

I'm back to my friend's statement about art, and there is an incomprehensible history embedded in the word 'European' which is now blooming in wondrous absurdity. We might say, as some *do* say, that 'European' means 'western Europe', with Italy, Austria and Germany as the Eastern border but not truly including Spain and Portugal because they are too medieval, and hardly including Italy itself because of Mediterranean anarchic culture. Not either including Germany much since Goethe and Hegel; it's been bent on backsliding into barbarity. Basically this Europe is France, Benelux and Great Britain (Scandinavia is too isolated up north). But I am always struck by the charming stupidity of Britons in calling themselves Great Britain and everyone else 'Europe'. England is not properly part of Europe; everyone knows it's in the ocean, with no other significant islands around. (But now, for reasons hard to follow, international soccer is an economic necessity, and the European teams and villages feel severely put upon by the peculiar type of civilised behaviour from the British side.)

Diana Trilling once said that only the English truly developed the novel. She made such a good case that, after considering the weaknesses of French, German, Spanish and Italian novels, I completely took her point. Except I substituted 'Russian' for 'English'.

I do agree with my friend. But if 'Europe' is actually no more than the expectation of a project (which in itself is a phenomenon of great importance, don't mis-understand me), it doesn't seem to follow sensibly that we should do more with the fact than to say thank you with sincere admiration (which in itself would be of great importance).

Can Europe, or even Europe with its 'white' colonies such as Canada and the US, use its invention of art exclusively, and exclusively for an internal discourse? I hope I've shown within common sense that the question is silly in every part.

Next, will they allow themselves or will we allow them to collect our invented authenticity? Will we allow them to collect our anger? Well, they cannot even manage that, because their existence is too ghostly.

Multiculturalism might be considered a viable strategy if anyone out there, including a soon-to-be-realized Europe, had any culture. But I expect not even then. Instead we would end up with something like an international 'sale of work', a 'garage sale' of trading units.

People have said to me, better to just do your work and forget all the theoretical *angst*. I think, more likely to forget work for a while and develop more *angst*.

Everyone knows so much these days. Isn't it odd how sure we all are? The New York city taxi driver who wrings a miserable life of unfulfilled dreams from his student days in Iran is sure that Salman Rushdie's death will fix things up. John Major is sure that if we return to English family values we'll work it all out.

As artists I think we should see our ideal audience as people smarter than ourselves. It is the very attitude we seem least willing to accept. And how rare that art ought to be coupled with intelligence anyway. We traditionally tie art to 'talent' (the most rusty old part of the European invention), to vision, and to some not-quite-defined instinctual characteristic (as though any of these were opposite to intellect).

I know there is a desire for learning, and that it is a desire for changing, because that is how we begin to see this new internationalism, but like England and Germany we tend to want to learn that which we already know. We want to expand art to be a part of the narrative in declaration. When Europe invented art it realised that it had invented a monster. To keep the monster pacified Europe asked it to tell stories; to uninvent itself and become text. To say that one picture is worth a thousand words is to say that one picture is *like* a thousand words. (And in England people still go to the Tate to look at the 'pictures'.) I am *sure* art should not be visual metaphor for text, and I feel that we give text more importance than it actually carries in daily life. It is not the only way of meaning, nor the only intellectual way of meaning.

I'm not saying that there is some art out there among us Third Worlders that should be included in the established art world for its positive destruction. I mean something more like why isn't there, and how might we make it so? There is an art discourse that is always on the verge of being interesting. Almost a discourse. We cannot just interrupt it with a new discourse, we have to enter it; Europe has to enter it; and each as ourselves with our own proper voices. Us who have neither selves nor proper voices.

As usual, we are looking toward the future as though it will be the past.

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