

The 'Nervous State': A Conversation between Jimmie Durham and Mick Taussig¹



Haus der Kulturen der Welt. 2010 Foto: Eva Olibet

MICK: So, Jimmie, tell me about the mirrors in this piece behind me, and why some of them have writing next to them?

JIMMIE: I like mirrors in general, they're kind of magic, and I have a long history in ... almost all summer dances that we do, especially the men, you have a mirror on your dancing, because, if you're dancing well, you might, kind of, be vulnerable. So if you have a mirror, any bad spirits that try to *enter* you while you are dancing, they will be reflected back and enter themselves instead of you (laugh).

So I have this nice background that way, but there is a similar story with the Aztecs. I just did a show in Mexico, and er, there is a beautiful god, named, what's his name, he's the plumed serpent ... Quetzal... (MICK: Quetzalcóatl) Quetzalcóatl, he's a beautiful serpent-god, he's half bird, half serpent, a dragon, beautiful dragon. Every fifty-two years, his twin brother escapes from the underworld, and he has to escape really hard, just like in European mythology. He has to come up from the underground and he loses a foot in the process, and he burns himself very badly, his chest is gaping open, his heart is exposed. And his name is Smoking Mirror. He's an obsidian mirror. He comes up and he gives a party for his brother, and they have the most beautiful wild party. And the next morning Quetzalcóatl is all drunk and hung over, and (chuckle) he's a rough old ... his twin brother holds up the mirror and says, 'Look at you!' And he looks just like his brother. So he goes into the underworld. And Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror man, reigns for fifty two years (chuckle).

And in the meantime, Quetzalcóatl is down there burning up so, he begins to look bad... but... I like mostly... when I make art, if I can put a mirror there, then I want you to say, as the audience, I want you to say, 'I am part of this work. I'm not a spectator of this work, I see me, I'm part of this work.' It's a cheap trick, but ... (laughter)

MICK: That reminds me of a time when we were having dinner a few years back and we were talking about the effectiveness of art in making a better world... and you raised your eyebrows and said 'I don't know about that. One can always make another video.' I see that as parallel to what you were just saying about a cheap trick. Um...

So the mirrors are held for the spirits to see themselves, not you the dancer (JIMMIE: Yeah). OK, so I was looking at this image over here, which I found in Australia, in a magazine, a couple of weeks back. And I said I think I know the person behind there (they laugh). That is you there, right? (JIMMIE: that's me). So is there any resemblance between that and using the mirror in the dance?

This piece is actually an art work, and it's called *Self Portrait Pretending to be a Stone Monument of Myself*. This is what I will look like when they make my monument. But maybe it's close, yeah, maybe it's close.

MICK: What about the relationship between the mirrors and text? Seems like a lot of the texts—and I'd like to talk about them in a second—have a mirror next to them. Is that part of that “cheap trick”?

JIMMIE: Part of the cheap trick, yeah. Because it's so easy, when you see history in front of you, to say ‘Oh, this is history, it is not part of me... this is part of (MICK: I was going to say that...) someplace else.’ And if you can in some way put yourself next to that...

MICK: I was going to say when I saw some of the texts, it's so good that people don't talk like that anymore, and boy, this is really wild stuff, or this is like a stereotype of a stereotype of the vengeful white man in America, and ah... I had a couple of thoughts on the reactions I was aware of in myself and one was, well, no matter how, um... how shall I put it, incredibly dramatic the statements are, um, they still burn into you, even though they seem sort of dated. Though you have one by a 1958, by Robert Moses, which brings us into the modern age. And he's the guy who designed the freeway systems around New York State, and I guess that upstate reservoir that feeds the water into the city and so forth. So that's a reminder that there is a continuation. But I was struggling with this thing, like that was back then, and that was another era, so why are these sentiments so vicious and ugly and burn viscerally, inside me, anyway, and I assume everybody here. And the other thing I wanted to ask and point out, at the same time, is... what... it's complicated. How does a liberal state compare with this apartheid, racist, genocidal state, how do you see the relationship between this other layer that is manifest in these statements like this and no-one would talk like that anymore, at least officially. They, that would be called hate speech or something. So doesn't this make your job—a third point might be—doesn't this make your job, the counter statement or the reaction, so much more difficult, 'cos people don't talk like that openly anymore, or very rarely, in the official ways.

JIMMIE: They kind of do though. They just bring it on to... They now claim that they love American Indians (laughs) they just transfer it to other things. I've had several artist friends living in New York during the time when the World Trade Centre fell down, and then after that, the next few years after that. And they were Arabs of one kind or another. And friends of mine in the administrative art world of the US, of NY city, wouldn't speak to them anymore. Because they were Arabs. But even more, if you look at things that the US Government or ‘normal’ US people are willing to say about anyone who is, in their perception, ‘in their way’, like we have been ‘in their way’: it's the same language, it's the same attitude, the same thoughts, the same language. I think there is something so strange, so strange, in the US, there are so many, er, television... they are called pundits, aren't they? I don't know what this word means (MICK: Hindu word for someone who knows everything). Hindu word, eh? But there are all these guys, especially, and they like to say, ‘These stupid Arabs, and their stupid religion’. They think if they go to heaven they will get seventeen virgins, and they like to make fun of this ... and these silly people, I don't know if you have met any Christians, but what they say, about their heaven, is that the streets are paved with gold. Now that's really crazy (chuckles) isn't it? What would you do, with this gold, in heaven? And what would you do with this street paved with gold? I'll take the virgins, maybe (laughter).



Jimmie Durham *Building a Nation* (detail of installation at Matt's Gallery), 2006. Courtesy the artist and Matt's Gallery, London

MICK: Looking at the Robert Moses statement, 1958, compared with say Theodore Roosevelt, otherwise known as Teddy, and a bunch of other guys there, is the language in a way *more* chilling, this sort of liberal language, because it is the stifling language of bureaucracy? [2] It's like a machine that's coming at you whereas the other is like, 'Go out an' kill 'em', yeah? (JIMMIE: yeah)

I wanted to ask you, or just pick up on something you said, er, about the way Native Americans can be cherished, as well as the opposite. And in this piece, is that brought out as well as in your writings where you talk about the impossibility, actually, of handling this schizoid attitude. It seems like that is one way of concentrating on what you called a 'certain lack of coherence'... which seems like to run through so much of your writing, and your art work which is a sort of delicate, umm, hesitancy which wraps itself around humour... let's things trail away, but how can you handle this love-hate situation? It seems to be very profound and eating away at what you are doing, the fact that there is no base to stand on. Whom am I talking to? Can I assume a universal, aaaah, audience? Can I speak from a position of great generalisations? Can you talk a bit about that in relationship to this piece or in relation to other pieces...?

JIMMIE: If I talk about it, I would talk about it in the context of *rage*. (pause) I'm just back from Glasgow and I met a very nice woman who is... I'm saying she is an old woman because she is very proud of being old. She is one year older than me. But she's very proud of getting that age. I'm not against her pride, for being that age. But she's from Australia, and she said:

'Are you, really an Indian?'
I said, 'Yes, I'm really an Indian.'
'And did you live with the Indians?' (laughter)

And this kind of question I had in the US so constantly, so constantly. But not in such a beautiful, er, phrase, 'Did you live (chuckles) with the Indians?'

'Yes, I lived with my girlfriend, and I lived with my Mom and Pop. I actually lived with them, yes I did.' (chuckles, laughter) But what you want to do is, is a kind of explosion, and, how beautiful that would be for her. It would be so entertaining, and she would say, 'Yes he really is an Indian, look at this rage, he went into an uncontrollable rage, he's really a (chuckles) savage.' So I said, 'Yes, yes, I lived among them, yes I did.' (chuckles)

There is a story I like very much, a true story. Suer, a Lakota Indian, who was a guide in the Black Hills, in the Homestake mine in the Black Hills, it's a gold mine. And it's owned by the William Randolph Hearst Corporation these days, but it's an old old mine. The Black Hills are supposed to be for the Sioux Indians, it's in the treaty that this is their centre, but they don't get it because of the gold. And that's where Mt Rushmore is. This horrible, horrible, monstrous mountain monument to four killers, four serial killers. (pause)

And this guy was a nice, christianised Indian. And his job was to take tourists around and show them everything. And he did it very very well for a long long time, years. And one day he stopped, and started shooting the tourists. And this... this phenomenon, isn't called 'going Lakota', it's called 'going postal' (MICK: mm) in the US, 'he went postal,' but that hadn't been invented yet, that phrase hadn't come up yet, because only Indians went postal, maybe Black people went postal. (chuckles) Once a white person went postal maybe it became, um, 'postal'.

But, er, (pause) I like very much the idea that, er, some people say, 'I'm not going to be insulted any more, I'm going to shoot you all instead'. I don't like the shooting part, (chuckles, laughter) I don't mean that. I'm against shooting people. (chuckles) Doesn't work. (pause) Did I lose my point? (laughter)

MICK: We were, um, we were, talking a bit about this aspect before, this morning, you and I and Valerie. And my daughter had sent me a thing called *Wikileaks*, which was some footage of some US airforce people shooting down some civilians in Baghdad, including a Reuters journalist who was carrying a camera, which the aircrew said was undoubtedly a weapon. [3] And I was thinking I might play that a little later. Many people are engrossed by this, er, footage which goes on for quite a long time accompanied with the discussion between the pilots and the shooters and the dispatchers and so forth. And um, the thing that stands out to me is the, um, the *detachment* from rage, that's what we were talking about, when does rage turn into coolness, or what happens if we are involved in a very violent act, er, but you are able to, er, *channel* the rage. I think that's a point made in a big way in Peter Sloterdijk's book, which I understand is the basis for the art show here, a book which I think in English is called *Rage and Time*, and which in German is called *Zorn und Zeit*, something like that. [4] This channeling of rage is one of his themes, channeling of rage in the making of the Third Reich, channeling of rage in race riots in India, for example, Hindus, Muslims and so forth, the channeling of rage, as he sees it, with young people, pretty much the world over but he's focusing in on Islam. And his book seems to be probe in a philosophical way the roots and consequences of rage, ever since, er, ever since Homer's book, the *Iliad*, which he sees as a focus on rage, Achilles rage and anger and self-destructive and destroying armies and so forth, through this uncontrollable rage that Sloterdijk starts. But anyway, the point that this *Wikileaks* thing brings home with great force is the, er... not the icy detachment that comes, especially when you are up in the air with a lot of guns, but the *humour*... er, almost like a game that's being played. So we were talking about or trying to discuss the, er, how shall I put it, this circular or figure eight relationship between the very violent or very angry on the one hand, and able to control that and channel that into, um, something that you would regard or that person would regard as effective, um... And you had some remarks about that, do you remember the sorts of things you were saying, about how important it is to not lose your temper, not to fall into the trap?

JIMMIE: A little bit. It's, er, it's a funny business about, er, how control, happens. Michael has a book called *The Nervous State*, if you haven't read it, it's very good about this sort of thing. What the State is and how the State does things. The State has the right to kill us. And we don't have the right to kill each other, and we don't have the right to kill the State. But the State has the right to kill us. This can make you uncomfortable, can't it? There is a—I'm gonna make a side line here—a place in the US called Texas. (laughter) And they kill more people officially in Texas, I think than anywhere else in the *world* probably, but certainly anywhere else in the free (chuckle) world. And, if you are sentenced to die in Texas, there is a bureaucratic committee

that you go to. And this committee is called the Clemency Board, the mercy committee, in other words. And you go before this committee, and you try to explain why they should not kill you. And it's been there for almost a hundred years. And they have never committed mercy. (chuckle) Not once. And they're not, er, professionals, it's like a jury. You're picked because of your good standing in the community, to be a member of this mercy committee. And... every time I think of this, I think of this... strange phenomena about rage and control. When you're in a rage, it's like, er, losing your temper and not getting it back. You've lost your temper, you have no more temper and what you have is a rage instead, and what you do is you are raging, you keep raging. If you're in sports, if you're a boxer, you try to get this from your opponent. Even before the fight, you start insulting your opponent. They do this in the US when they are weighing in, to see if they are right for each other, to hit each other, if they're the right people to hit each other. And then they start insulting each other right away. You are trying to make your opponent feel afraid of you, and he will then lose control, if he is afraid of you. I've done this myself many times, in fights, that were not professional fights, just having a fight in a bar or something. You start insulting and you try to make the toughest threats against the other guy. What you're gonna cut off him (chuckle, laughter) and all this kind of stuff. (MICK: I can't believe it!) So, if you lose control, in this boxing match, you've already lost the game, because the other man who doesn't lose control is still cool and professional. And this is what the State always wants to prove to us. That they cannot lose control (MICK: Right) that they cannot lose control, that *you* are the one who's stupid and doing the wrong thing.

I want to tell a story of something that just happened to me. I had to tell Maria-Theresa, 'Don't worry, this is something that is just happening'. We were in Glasgow, but we came to Rome for five days, and we went back to Glasgow, and they didn't want to let us in. And it was late at night, and they said you need a work permit. And I started talking and talking, and they start talking, and I suddenly realised I had to do something to convince them of my innocence. And if I was innocent, I couldn't be cool. So I started acting *as though* I were in a rage. I started pretending to lose my temper, and I was doing it as though I was an American. And I said, 'So, so you don't like America, huh? You don't like Americans,' and raising my voice only a certain amount, and showing a certain amount of bad temper, just to convince them of my (chuckle) innocence... Where's Maria-Theresa? Didn't work, did it? (chuckle, laughter)

MICK: I was going to say something sexist, I mean it will be interpreted as sexist...so that's why girls cry in that situation?

JIMMIE: Yeah, exactly ... I'm gonna try it next to see what happens. (laughter).

MICK: I've been asked to cry a bit, more than I do. So the relationship between crying and raging... Crying is not raging, right?

JIMMIE: Kind of is, because you can be... it's about having no control, so it is. There is a relationship, yeah. It's about having no control.

MICK: But with the rage you are threatening to, you're threatening somebody... with crying you're threatening somebody, maybe, but it's trying to guilt them out, to wound them, to make them feel bad about what they've done to you. As opposed to bashing them on the head. This way you bash them *in* their head. Yeah.

JIMMIE: Quite often, but, er—I'm such a nice man, but I used to not be—and quite often, women that I was with would cry and I would think sympathy, but the next moment they're up and at me. The crying goes into rage.

MICK: Well, we're going to have questions later, so there might be some people who want to (chuckle) dig more in this, realm. I wanted to continue on this thread and um, mention that in this video, that I'm referring to, one of the fascinating things is the way one of the characters, one of the soldiers, gunners, is referred to as Crazy Horse. (JIMMIE: Mmm) It's quite amazing to see this kind of jittery footage looking down, on the street, I dunno, about a hundred foot below, and, ah, people moving and trying to get away from these bullets and um, the bullets are so effective, the helicopter is so *powerful*, that it can more or less pick out people all the time and the pilot, or gunners are convinced or frightened (something we might want to bring in

here) that they just shoot, sort of blindly, everybody and everything. And it's actually just one guy with a camera but they're convinced it's a powerful weapon. Then they see (chuckle) *everybody* as a powerful weapon. And it just spreads like wildfire, this fear, but they *contain* it within this sardonic, sarcastic, sort of humorous conversation that's going back and forth. And one of the things that I think holds this fabric together, this delicate tissue we keep talking about between rage and crying, between rage and fear, between rage and cool, is this, apparently, the use of this iconic figure of Crazy Horse.

And Valerie and I were talking a little bit about this aspect, and she reminds me that most, if not all, of the helicopters in the US are named after American Indian tribes. I want to bring in the State and enumeration and science a little bit here: there's the RAH66 (otherwise known as the Comanche); there's the AH56 Cheyenne; there's the OH858 Kiowa; there's the AH60 Black Hawk, which is famous in books; and there's the CH47 Chinook. So I wanted to, um, wonder a little bit about the use of the Indian appellation, the Indian naming system here in such situations, and referring to the comments that are in the art piece behind me, and thinking about how that works psycho-philosophically, to hold this what I call 'delicate' tissue together, between rage fear and cool in order to become an effective fighting force. And um... I guess it's sort of pretty obvious really, isn't it? There's this identification in a very weird sort of way with the enemy, i.e. with Crazy Horse, and the necessity to control or eliminate such a person, and the persons that person stands for. And, um, almost magically acquire those properties of the warrior that you're destroying. And when you put it that way, it sounds very bizarre, right? But everybody understands, I think, the circularity of that logic...

JIMMIE: Yeah. It starts with when we stopped being monkeys, I think. When we stopped being monkeys I think it starts there. But the Romans did that also, and the Romans claimed that they never met such vicious warriors as the Germanic tribes. But of course they had lunch with the most vicious warriors every day, themselves! (chuckles) Of course they had met vicious warriors, and then they said that the Picts, the old Scottish people, were the most vicious people, and so on and so on. (pause) But once it evolves into Europeans with that history getting into their new world and doing this strange genocide, at the same time that they're loving us. Then it becomes, er, super circular-crazy, circular-crazy, and everybody goes crazy at the same time I think.

But we were also saying this morning that this thing, this phenomenon, leads to this, er, horrible phrase in the US, 'off the reservation', to mean now it meant just a couple of years ago, Indians who were not acting right, meaning we were 'off the reservation', we were out of control. And then it came to mean anyone like a rogue policeman or a crooked soldier, or any person who's not 'doing right', a businessman who's snitching on his company. Then you're 'off the reservation', it's a way of saying (pause) we, we have the power and we have the savagery, that we took the power from all in sight of us, all at the same time. So we can, er, say Geronimo, and we know that, er, that we're kind of, er. I don't know (chuckles) what they mean when they say these things! You know what they mean (continues chuckling) I have no idea what they're talking about! When they do this mimicking of our mimicking of their mimicking of us. This circularity. I don't know what they're doing.

MICK: I wanna continue on this, I wanna go back for a second 'cos you reminded me of something about the importance of being cool and not being outrageous, or not being rage-full. Um... (pause)

I was born in Australia, lived in Australia a long time, and then keep going back, and I bump into people, especially anthropologists, many of them work with Indigenous people. And I come across the incredible figures for what is called Death in Custody. Which is Aboriginal men, usually in prison, who are found hung, found suicided, supposedly suicided. And incredible figures, and all sorts of investigations and nothing is ever proved, or done and so forth. And one of the things I heard about was the unofficial, er, boxing matches between Indigenous people and policemen in police stations. (Audience: ooh!) And ah, when I was a kid there were these Royal Easter Shows, and there was Jimmie Sharman and his Boxers, and people delighted in seeing these, er, Indigenous people boxing, boxing each other or boxing anyone who'd step up from the crowd. But this, with the alcohol, and with the culture that develops in certain parts of Australia, this taking on the police, physically, on the part of Indigenous men, is really like a crazy device or thing that's happening, so if someone is apprehended and they're drunk, what they'll do is lash

out at the police, which gives the police, who are frightened, too, an excuse to be really violent. And then you may end up with a death in custody situation. There's an amazing book that was written two or three years ago by a woman called Chloe Hooper? Called *The Tall Man* which is a description of one of those cases. Basically a prison island called Palm Island, off the coast of Northern Australia, Queensland, which describes in really vivid detail how this step into rage occurs so frequently and so quickly and so violently. So that's another story of story if you like or image or picture, or this, er, er, how shall I put it, historically created stage in which rage is produced, as opposed to the pilots, in the helicopter in this Wikileaks footage where you get the opposite thing, but using the name of the Indigenous people, as a way of maintaining your, as a way of staying *this side* of cool and not that side of rage. OK?

I wanted to continue a little bit on the issue of, um, this schizoid, love-hate thing we were talking about and mimicry. When I was living in Colombia, in South America, in the Putumayo area of the Amazon drainage, just coming down the Andean mountains, thinking about the documents of the rubber bond which occasioned what in those days were called atrocities, like the atrocities in Leopold's Congo over rubber and ivory in 1905. And in the Putumayo it was around 1912. But the, er, the same sort of sentiments that Jimmie's got in the show here about Native Americans are present there in terms of what they call in fancy language the trope or the theme or the picture of cannibalism. And it, er, seems when you put history together in some ways, that the image of cannibalism and the fear of cannibalism, is what legitimates the (laughs) cannibalistic behaviour of, in this case, the colonists, or the rubber company, if you like. So they need this picture. It seems that the so-called savagery is a very important part to incorporate in your own being, and your own society, in order to inflict savagery on the savages. And of course the cannibalism is *incredibly* misunderstood and *incredibly* (laughs) exaggerated. But you don't need much (laughs) to create enough fuel, enough energy, to be savage to savages, and that's that sort of loop that we're talking about here.

I was thinking, um, that when I think about your work, in general, that one way of thinking about it is this incessant um, ah, fight, this incessant dance, to keep cool and not be outrageous, ah, in the, ah, this sort of mimetic circle, this play of mirror on mirror which we have talked about right at the beginning? In which a term is appropriated or a person is appropriated, like, let's say, the warrior ethos of native Americans, Or the warrior ethos of Indigenous Australian people. This is *appropriated*, a particular *person* is appropriated. He has a great name, Crazy Horse, you know, couldn't think of a better name, right? And, ah, the dance, then, the mirroring of the mirroring, involves reappropriating that appropriation. But it seems to me, and now I'm putting my own gloss on this... it seems to me, that can only last a shorter period of time before it's reappropriated by the first party again, and it's a thing that keeps spinning like crazy. (JIMMIE: Yeah) I call it the nervous system, you call it a nervous state, but I call it a nervous system. Like you have your chance for another five minutes, make another video. (laughs) Write another article. And then I get quite mystical and silly here and that's where Jimmie and I would part company because he's so grounded. I always think of this sort of machine, I have a paranoid view that the reality just swallows up your stuff and will spit it back at you, in a, in a distorted way. But I call it the nervous system, as I feel in my writing anyway, that I'm given a small chance for a small amount of time to make a dent, and that what I'm writing against will snap back at me and swallow it, and so we keep moving all the time. Anyway that's what I was thinking about these mirrors, and so forth.

JIMMIE: I don't remember this man's name, which makes me feel quite fortunate, but he was the dictator of Uganda. (someone supplies name) Idi Amin, yeah. As a, as a child, he was the mascot of the Belgian army. They took him on as a pet, like. And by the time he was twelve years old they were making him box. And he was boxing soldiers, Belgian soldiers, and he was a tough kid. 'Cos he'd been the army mascot. So they would hit him in the head with a piece of wood while he was boxing someone else, as a game, to show how tough he was. So that made *him* have to show how tough he was of course. He had no choice. And he had to be crazier and crazier, and that kind of proved their point. They were being so savage with this boy, and it proved that he was a savage. Then he grows up, and they kind of wanted him there because he wasn't a communist, so they wanted this guy in. And then they said, 'What a horrible savage' once he got in. (laugh) And he wanted to be Scottish, once he got in, he wanted to be like them. (chuckle) He was hoping to become Belgian, and even English, even Scottish... (pause)

(...)

MICK: I wanted to talk a little bit more and then open up to questions. And I wanted to ask or point out some stuff about... ah... this piece of yours, which I call sort of—don't be offended—'junk history', like a junk yard of history (JIMMIE: Oh, yeah; chuckles) trash. (laughs) Actually there are quite a few points I wanted to make, they're very (embarrassed laugh) academic, but you can switch off!

One thing about this stone, which you can think of as obsidian if you want to, there is an obsidian mirror actually in the piece, sort of cheap obsidian, it's got 'fuck you' written on it, and a few other things (laughs) in Mexican language. Ah... I always keep saying the same thing, so... well don't we all? I like this notion of Adorno, Theodor Adorno, when he's trying to describe Benjamin. What's really important about Walter Benjamin's work to him, and this is one of those few essays of Adorno's (I'm sorry) which is easy to understand. And he says at one point that, um, that, that Benjamin is obsessed with thinghood, like that piece of stone let's say, or all the stuff in Jimmie's work. This guy's obsessed with objects and things. And it's deeply historical, right? But he's not seeing them as symbols, necessarily, it's more like the stuff that escapes symbolisation, or easy symbolisation, and it's a little too easy to say that this is the excess of the signifier and blah blah blah, so we'll just leave it simple. So Benjamin is obsessed with things and Adorno has this flash of insight, and he's got other theories nudging his elbow here about capitalism and reification and so forth but we needn't worry about that at the moment. He says that um, Benjamin... 'for him it is necessary to become a thing in order to break the magic spell of things'. And I've always been so intrigued by that, the necessity to become a thing in order to break the magic spell of things. We're back to these mirrors again if you like, that's one way of thinking about it. But it's also a way of thinking about ah, the relationship between things and a type of materialism you talk about in your work in certain places. Not the materialism of having a second car, and a swimming pool and so forth, but a different relation to the object world, that is of concern here.

And ah, I, um... I was also intrigued in Benjamin's work by his emphasis on small things, in the world, he calls it trash, like a philosophy of trash is the important way to go and I think of certain writers and anthropologists, I think of Beckett, where Beckett can spend fifteen to twenty pages talking about what's going on when I move my leg, and why it (laughs) hurts. And shifting the pebbles from one pocket to the other pocket, to the third pocket, the fourth pocket, and working out all the mathematical combinations involved, (laugh) and then getting frightened that his calculations are not quite right, and emptying out all his pockets. (laugh) I mean that's like the ultimate extreme of dealing with a small grain of life, if you like.

And, um, Jimmie talks quite a lot about this relationship to objects and what objects can mean, what materialism means in his work, and I wanted to... er, talk, I wanted to, I found this nicely expressed in a, in a poem of his which was written a long time ago, but it seems like yesterday, um. It might be of some help to people, or it's an added, it's like the *desert* on top of the art work (let me see if I can find it...).

It can be difficult to listen to someone reading, so I'll try to make it... not like that (laugh) they're very short, one is called 'Object 1984', er, '64', you must have just been born, (JIMMIE: chuckles) I mean it's like a *long* time ago. This was when you were fighting in those bars. (JIMMIE: I was already old, I was a bar fighter in '64) (chuckles, laughter) So this is hardly you, both you and I go back a long way here.

Object

It must have been an odd object to begin with.
Now the ghosts of its uses
Whisper around my head, tickle the tips
Of my fingers.
Weeds
Reclaim with quick silence the beams, pillars,
Doorways.
Places change, and a small object

Stands defiant in its placenessness.
Durable because it contains intensely meanings
Which it can no longer pour out.

Well, it is certainly clear when I walk through that piece. And over the page, without a title, and also written in 1964, I read this:

Like a dead Comanche's pony (I think one of the helicopters is called Comanche)
Like a dead Comanche's pony
It bites the dust (you can see this is going to be a really dramatic and heavy poem)
Its dry tongue dragging in the sand
And its eyes staring holes in the sky.
The sole is torn, worn from miles
Of work.
Who places these mateless, forlorn
Shoes (chuckles) in deserts?
Who throws single shoes from
Windows of cars to deserted shoulders
Of highways?
In honour of history and its marches let us
Have a closet museum of dropped and discarded
Shoes

So, what a turn-on. Trying to think about the place of discarded and lost objects that have lost their meaning and ah, maybe not completely... works of, like the one behind us, suddenly there's this flicker of return, if not redemption...

I wondered if, ah... You have a piece called Edge of the City, where you seem to be thinking about the place of ah the city and the country, the city and the reservation, some sort of ah, miserable trash heap which contains the garbage of the city. Maybe I'm making this too melodramatic, but that's the place, er, it seems to me, you're saying your art is stimulated by, it comes from?

JIMMIE: Exactly that. (MICK: Shoes for instance...)

I like to be in the mountains or the forest but I *really* like to be in the dumps (chuckles, laughter). Everything is interesting. Nature is there. Every kind of nature. So much of the countryside in the world is taken over by farming. So you have more, for example you have more foxes in London than you do in the countryside around London. And there's no fox hunters in London, so they eat the garbage. And, er, in Glasgow, where I've just lived, the crows take the garbage sacks out of the public, put them on the sidewalk. If you're out in the *edge* of the city this sort of thing goes on, nature *explodes* in celebration. And at the same time you get the explosion of the city, you get everything from the city there, condensed. And, you get, the people of the city, that are not *of* the city. That's where the gypsies live, in Rome, in these beautiful no-man's land outskirts. And they are always more interesting than the Roman Romans (chuckle), these gypsies. (pause) I like the... I like the uncontrolled part of things.

MICK: I was gonna suggest now if there are any questions, ah, that people might have, that we can try and respond to... here's a question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, this question is actually for Jimmie, um, you know, walking through your piece over there, what was very provocative for me is that it also uses the floor, as part of it, and you are actually forced to walk all over the art. Now um, (laughs) you mentioned before Mt Rushmore, and, um, which is a monument that is basically blasted into the land, and a lot of your works back there actually deal with the appropriation of land. So I wanted to ask you, um, I guess if the land is a character in this work, and if so, what kind of character is it, and what does the land mean in reference to it?

JIMMIE: I was quite touched in Scotland, reading about the clearances that happened beginning, say, in the 1850s. Taking people out of the highlands of Scotland, sending them to Australia,

sending them to Canada, to the US. And it's called 'clearances', it's not called genocide, it's called clearances. (laugh) It means there were 'land lords', isn't *that* a silly term, the most ridiculous thing to say, 'land lords'? Who owned all this land, and they didn't want people on it, they wanted sheep 'cos they wanted money. And, supposedly, this was one of the last places in Europe where land had not been turned into money. And not until these clearances did people in the Scottish highlands have the idea that land was *only* for money. That it was made for money. And this is what they've been trying to drum into our thick Indian brains. (chuckle) There is no land, there is not something that is the earth, there are opportunities for money, there are investment opportunities. (chuckle) When, er, when Americans, and now even Europeans, want to go back to nature, on the weekend or in the summer, they go back for strange entertainment. So that the land is like something to entertain you. So you do something especially bad, to me, called 'white water rafting'. You put on all this gear, and you treat nature as though it were a, a ride. As though nature were a ride, in what do you call these things? Fairs, in a fair, a rollercoaster ride in a fair, a thrilling ride on a rollercoaster or something like that. Nature is to be thrilling. And what I *still* like about the US and Canada; every once in a while a bear *eats somebody*. (chuckle, laughter) Somebody's cycling by, and they think they can cycle by. (laughter) (pause) It means we're not living on the land. We don't know the land, we're living off the land, in a very physical kind of mental way. We live about three feet in the air all the time. Psychically, that's where we live, and just waiting to go through those pearly gates and get on those golden streets. Waiting to get to heaven. (chuckle) In the meantime, it's all for money. You can take a piece of this 'land', that you call 'land', and have this piece of it and buy it and sell it. Such a, such an exotic idea. And it seems so *normal* to people, doesn't it? Seems so normal, yes of course, I have this land in Aberdeenshire and, er, the trouble is there are these people there, and I can evict these people. (chuckle) I can evict these people.

Now we have this, er, New Yorker, Donald Trump, (chuckle) saying I want to use this land properly, I want to make a golf course. So he's evicting people 'cos he bought this land from land lords. And he's going to allow... people of leisure to experience nature by playing golf. (chuckle) (pause) Strange business, isn't it?

MICK: I read there's one guy who's holding out (JIMMIE: Yeah, yeah!) a miserable plot of a quarter acre, and all his neighbours are angry at him that he won't sell to Donald Trump for the golf course. Trump of course explains that his ancestors come from this area and it means that this has great sentimental value to him, but this guy's still holding out?

What about Ayesha's point about walking over the floor, and the land? I mean it's a nice point.

JIMMIE: It's a very nice point... I like very much this fake stone stuff, it's called, er, different kinds of laminate. So it's on the floor. It makes me nervous to walk on it. I, I, I *hope* for people to be a little *nervous*, walking on art-work (chuckle)... It didn't work in Mexico. Marie-Theresa and I were in a show in Monterrey, in '92. And not us, but another artist, put paintings all over the floor. And, the local bourgeoisie were having *such* a good time *stomping* (chuckle) on these paintings.

MICK: Ah, more questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a question. I was thinking about what Mick said about the language used in the nineteenth century that you wouldn't be using today, and how it translates into our language. And I remembered this very strange law that was passed in the 90s in the US by the Congress. I think it's called Indian Arts and Crafts Act? And I think you've been affected by it as well? Where you had to prove that you are Indian in order to exhibit as Indian... and you had to be one sixty fourth Indian (laughs) to be considered. In terms of inflicting savagery on people in the 19th century in that context, how does this translate into inflicting a certain identity onto people?

JIMMIE: The law wasn't about blood quantum as it's called. This is another funny side issue in, er, not only in the US, but all over the Americas. If you are a *little* bit black, you're black, but if you are a *little bit* Indian, there is the problem of what do you want from it. Because the... treaty that we signed with Canada, the US, Mexico, the deals that each Indian group made, has a limited area, usually something like a reservation. So all these treaties were made at time the

population was at its very lowest, and there was not much land there, not enough land to sustain people, in most cases. Then, the governments pretend that they are helping us, by giving us a piece of money, some government surplus food in the US case, peanut butter, white bread, lard, grease, these kinds of things.

It makes a kind of a fight if there are too many people on this piece of land or after this government surplus food, or this little bit of money, this welfare money, then people might not be afraid there might not be enough to go around. So, the government itself set up these enrolments for each reservation. And this happens in Canada, and it happens in Mexico, it happens everywhere. So it's not your blood quantum exactly, it's whether or not you are enrolled in the tribal rolls. And this enrolment is invented by the government and controlled by the government. It's a government thing. It only is after the seventies that everyone agreed to it. We had a big fight in the seventies, and we lost, the fight, we lost *everything*. And then, everyone said, yes, yes, enrolment. So even friends of mine suddenly went to their tribal council which is a government organisation, and got enrolled, and became enrolled Indians. Only because we lost our fights and everything went crazy.

It's a strange idea, though, to say a full-blood Indian, and they don't mind saying it, they like to say it. They like to say 'Yes, he was a full-blood Cherokee.' When they have a friend or something like that or maybe their grandfather or whatever. But you wouldn't say it about... I had a... I will say it now. I had a girlfriend, she was full-blooded French. Sounds a little strange, doesn't it? Sounds a little pornographic, doesn't it? (chuckles, laughter) You wouldn't say a full-blooded African. You wouldn't say a full-blooded Irishman. It's *only* about people of North and South America, it is a *specific* piece of colonialism.

I was in the... in this show I just did in Glasgow, I talked about this fight that took place up in Canada in Montréal at Oka part of a Mohawk reservation and the government was taking it, taking the burial site as a golf course... yeah. So local French Canadians, are all mixed blood with American Indians, with Canadian and American Indians. And they look much more Indian in the racial sense of Indian, than the local Mohawks. Most of the Mohawks had blue eyes, like me, and very many of them had blond hair and they looked more Scottish than anything else. So the local racist Chinooks were... standing on the street throwing stones at the Mohawks who were coming out in the cars. And the police were helping them. The only person that was hit by a stone was an old French-Canadian man, who was riding with his Indian wife. But she was blond, and he looked like an Indian, so he got it. (chuckle) (pause) Colonialism is not good for you.

MICK: Jimmie, what about Flagia's question about the right to sell art and what impact does that have on the art, and on your relationship to that art?

JIMMIE: It had really no effect on me at all, it didn't mean anything to me. One show was, er, moved in San Francisco from one place to another, but it was supposed to be in the local American Indian community house and all the people were my friends, but suddenly they were afraid that the government would take their money, so they said let's do it over at this other place. So the very same people took it over to the other place, so that they wouldn't lose their money. Otherwise it meant nothing to me. And if it means something to somebody... I think it might mean something not good at all, because... the people who want to buy American Indian art have surely ulterior motives, whether they know it or not. Why are they wanting to buy American Indian art, what do they mean when they say that? I don't buy art, but if I did I wouldn't buy French art (I'm sorry to be picking on the French, but they just come up, that's all (laugh)). I wouldn't buy European art, 'oh! I like European art.' (Mick: Jewish art). Jewish art! 'Oh, I like Jewish art.' (chuckle) Strange business.

So if you are, and I have many friends who are, young American Indian artists, the *worst* thing that could happen to you in your development as an artist, is to be doing American Indian art, just like if you are a young Jewish artist, if you are doing Jewish art. (chuckle) It wouldn't help you in your development as an artist, it would destroy you in your development as an artist. So... the law has not mean anything to anyone and finally it disappeared... a piece of craziness in the nineties.

MICK: Hey, I'm thinking maybe one more question, and then we close up? And if there isn't one... someone in the front here?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wasn't exactly sure what I think about this or how to phrase it, um, but I'm just wondering about you living here and talking about, you know, over there. And if its somehow, if you find that it is necessary to be away from North America to somehow see clearly, to see it clearly or, now that you've been here for quite some time. What do you think about that, as opposed to living there, 'being there'?

JIMMIE: When I'm asked stupid racist questions in Europe, it doesn't make me have rage. I can say, 'silly people', because they're not bothering my people. In the US, or Canada, or Mexico, or Brazil, if someone says some silly racist thing, it might seem harmless or it might seem harmful, either way, I immediately have to control rage. Because they are there, on the land, and they are responsible for what they do there. Europeans can have any kind of silly attitude about us, over there, I don't care (chuckle) until they go over there, they're OK.

So I feel that, er, I that, uh, I can participate in Europe with European things, I can be an intellectual activist in Europe about things that happen in Europe. I don't have to be European to be here, I can participate at the same time and I don't have to constantly go over all these boring old stories about what happened in the (chuckle) old days.

SAME QUESTIONER: It's a win-win situation. (JIMMIE: huh?) It's a win-win situation because you're not there, and you're not here, you're somewhere in between maybe.

JIMMIE: But I'm very often, and this is not meant to sound like I'm bragging or something, I'm very often *more here* than other people I know here. Because I like... I like to be someplace, so... I know the insects, I know the flowers and I know the trees very quickly, only because I'm interested in them. And if I'm just living and looking at these things, I'm just looking at the world I live in, right where I am. And, for me this begins with the plants and the insects. You don't ever see any of these things in literature, and in film, you never see them. When the cowboy's riding out west, there's never any insects, maybe... in a spaghetti western the guy slaps a mosquito, you never know anything about this mosquito. (chuckles, laughter) To be in the actual world is so interesting to me, that's (chuckle) all.

VALERIE: That was in your book, about the spider on the plant (JIMMIE: Oh, yeah, the spider) yeah (the mysterious spider)... Back where I'm from, the scientists think they have rediscovered a lost, extinct woodpecker. When I was a child in this forest, this bird was already extinct, but I knew it perfectly well, I saw them all the time. But now that they've rediscovered it, and they're trampling everything else in this little tiny bit of forest that's left, chasing this woodpecker. And we have these beautiful big spiders, that we call garden spiders because they like to be in the garden, 'cos it's a nice clear place and they're quite giant and colourful. And these scientists hate them because they're big and colourful. And they're calling them banana spiders, I don't know why they're calling them banana spiders. They don't want anything but the woodpecker. Even your typical woodpecker would be wary of a scientist *stomping* though the forest with... (laughs) (pause)

Anybody else?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Sorry to bother the audience with another question. But I had a question to Mick Taussig as well. We were talking about the rage of Mr. Durham, but you as an anthropologist of, um, also knowing the state of moving back and forth, going there being here, being in a state of betwixt and between, or whatever you might call it. How are you expressing or controlling your, um, rage?

(pause)

Very personal question, sorry.

(pause)

MICK: You know I can't answer from the gut, and I'm a bit worried about that. The logical answer is that you do it, in my case, through, through writing, and maybe through human encounters like, in teaching. I would have thought the worlds you construct, the worlds you can make, in, in, in the writing, in the language, keep you on a sort of... sanity, or even keel. And it's always a mixture, isn't it? There's rage, there's depression, there's humour. All those things can get mixed in that laboratory or whatever it is that you spend every morning doing, every day of the week, et cetera. So that would seem the sort of obvious, um, vehicle or container or um outlet or... and so on. But more psychically, um, I'm not sure, um, I'm not sure... You know it is commonly said especially during the George W Bush years about irony. Complex phenomenon, irony, saying, well, irony is what you do when you can't really do anything. When you're up against the wall you can't... you take on what you're angry about and you twist it a little bit, and feed it back to where it came from so it is ineffective, and it is a sign of weakness. And I would think, um, that being ironic, and the ironic posture, is an important way of, er, dealing with rage, and it's interesting that by way of response... my response to you is that it is not so emotional, I'm not couching it in emotional terns, it's more like a mixture of logics in which the emotions are absorbed. So there'd be a lot more to talk about, but that would be a first response.

(pause)

JIMMIE: But I think that's right for most of us. Not teaching, but having a community that you deal with intellectually, which can be students and that sort of thing as much as it could be galleryists, and, museum curators. (chuckle)

(pause)

Thank you all for coming.

(applause)

I'm sorry I was drinking wine at first, but I got it outside and I didn't want to guzzle it, so I brought it inside. I know you were jealous, but... (laughter)

(chuckle)

(sound fades)

¹ This transcription is a pre-publication of a Performance/Talk, 'An Evening With Jimmie Durham And Mick Taussig,' at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin on 29.04.2010. © Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2010. This transcription, faithful to the grain of the performance, with hesitancy, mood, and audience responses noted, was made by Stephen Muecke.

² From Jimmie Durham's *Building a Nation* installation, a quotation from President Theodore Roosevelt (1886) "I don't go as far as to think that 'the only good Indians are dead Indians', but I believe nine out of ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth."

³ <http://wikileaks.org/> Project website: www.collateralmurder.com

⁴ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Rage and Time*, trans. Mario Wenning, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).