



3 0121 00056 4953

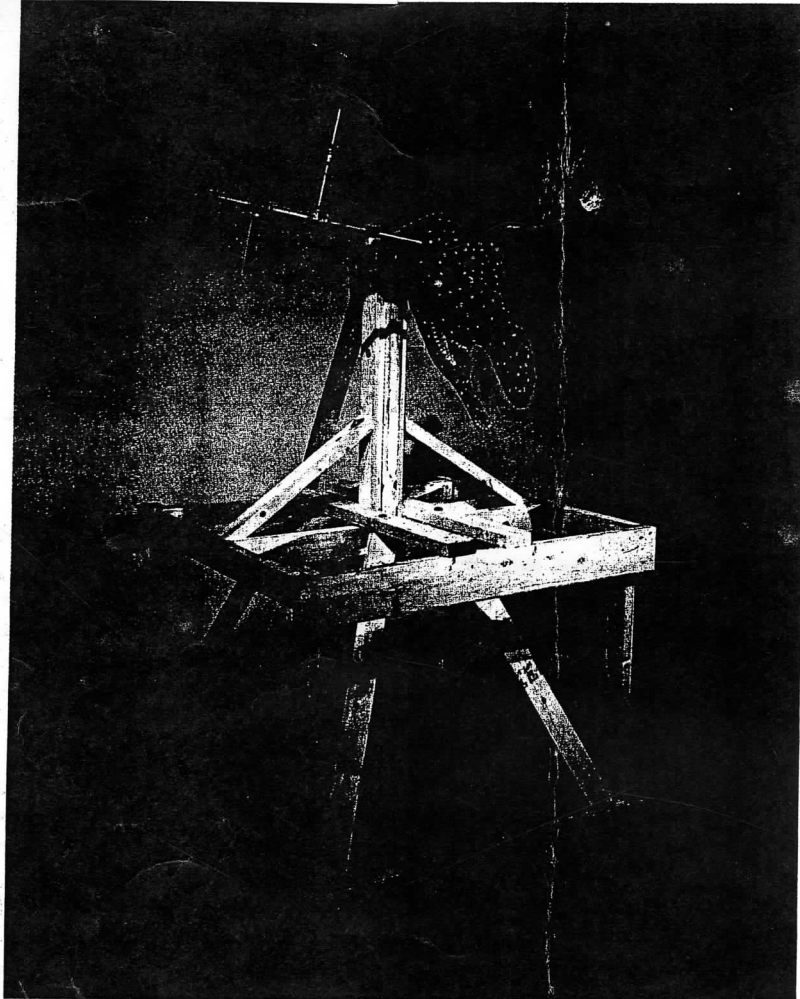
ON CLASS RESERVE

Van Dyke -
Critical Struc

2 HOUR LOAN

"Probably This Will Not Work"

Jimmie Durham



Jimmie Durham, *The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan is the World's Largest Gothic Cathedral. Except, of course, that it is a fake; first by the simple fact of being built in Manhattan, at the turn of the century. But the stone work is re-inforced with steel which is expanding with rust. Someday it will destroy the stone. The Cathedral is in Morningside Heights overlooking a panoramic view of Harlem which is separated by a high fence*, 1989. Mixed media. Courtesy Collection of Dieter Broska, Germany.

People ask me in the U.S., where I was born and I have to give a Cherokee answer, that begins with the beginning of the universe and goes through the creation of Cherokee people up to my birth. Partly, because that's the way we like to see things, in a whole situation, and partly, because where I was born is a political situation called the U.S., not in a so-called 'state' of the U.S. You might say I was born under the state of Arkansas, because my people were there long before the state of Arkansas. The state of Arkansas is against us, we're not a part of it, nor the state of Oklahoma nor Arizona or any other of these states. But to say that I was born under the state of Arkansas makes it as though I am already dead! I've written three new pages to read, after which I'm probably going to ramble incoherently!

We seem so often now to be on the brink of some absurd world war, wherein the enemy is not clearly seen. When we look at the globe we must think, maybe the war has actually begun. And what strange and drastic changes have occurred just in the past ten or twelve years.

But we would have a great unease even without the stupid chaos of these recent times, because so many phenomena are reaching crises points simply through mathematical statistics. I've read, for example, that world population might stabilize in the next twenty to fifty years, either at ten billion people or twenty billion people. We'll have ten billion very soon. And how are we to think of that? How can we think of art, literature, or, really, any human project with this almost obscene figure, ten billion people? Where, even, is any human knowledge at that level?

And then our places are changing before our eyes, even as we defend old, practically imaginary places. Immigrants from south-east Asia are changing demographic and cultural politics, not only in the western U.S., but also in Ireland, unnoticed, while Catholics and Protestants try to solve their old dilemma.

In Mexico the government kills Indians. The fact is not known much in the

FROM: STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL - NOW!

ED: CHRISTIAN CHAMBERT

SWEDISH ART CRITICS ASSOCIATION PRESS, 1995

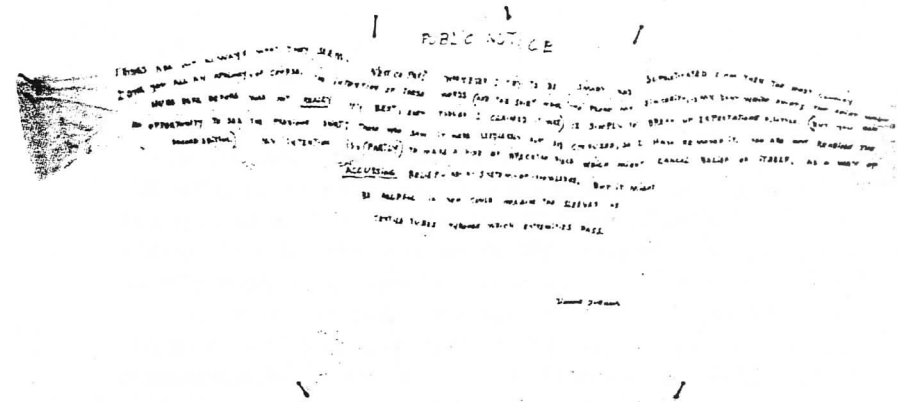
world, not even in Mexico City. But it is not especially newsworthy. The scale is on not that of Rwanda, and the world has troubles enough to consider. But 1994 began with an armed Indian uprising, in southern Mexico, that soon spread to other Indian communities around the country.

In late January I wrote to a friend in Europe about my frustrations. I said the obvious, that art has no possibility of functioning, of influencing, of making even the most subtle or timid intervention in a crisis. Art needs a longer time, a quieter time, a complex, indirect approach. It doesn't function well in the short run. In Mexico I have been confronted with a crisis that demands immediate action. And my work can not find a place. Just a few months ago we had been struggling to maintain some serious discourse about art itself in Mexico, against bourgeois colonial attitudes and cultural gangsterism. In June I was in Belgium, showing with a group of young Mexican artists. The dialogue I'd intended fell apart in front of the new Mexican Indian war.

But, even though we, and certainly I, can not be coherent about our expectations for art, as part of some vague humanizing project, we *do* have those expectations. We think art must be doing something... that artists must be more than crafts people or iconoclasts, more than entertainers.

I do not like most art and why should I? No one expects to like most writing, that is, most of the books published each year. It seems to me that artists agree to be stupid in the name of sophistication. Someone has told us that art really is separate from other human endeavours. The implication of such a non-sensical proposition is stunning. If art is just art, or if any human endeavour is a separate singularity without reference to all others, then it would have to be what used to be called bestial, but bestial to some other beast than the human beast, since part of our species' program is the integration of systems and the creation of meaning.

But the art I do not like comes from artists who *know* so much. They're so



Jimmie Durham, **Untitled**, 1993. Cotton and ink.

sure of things. I imagine they have been hypnotized. And so, the work is complacent; it pretends. Then we find ourselves pretending along with the pretense, pretending to ourselves that we don't notice it, something destructive, something at variance with our human project is thereby produced.

This complacency that I see artists having, I think probably it comes from fear and from fear of facing fear. And if that's the case, then we are in danger of becoming something really monstrous. It's more than just whistling in the dark. I think we as artists and as an art system, as an art discourse with critics, galleries, collectors, magazines and so on, I think we can generate inhumanity. I think it's easy for us to generate inhumanity, when we're not generating humanity, when we're not deliberately doing something with the human project, when we're just having fun or doing something frivolous, which is different from funny or silly, I think.

We join the war on the side of the enemy. We generate inhumanity, that's what I think. I recently read an interview with V. S. Naipaul, the British Indian

writer, that I like very much, because he's a curmudgeonly complainer. And I have a soft spot for those kinds of people. He said he doesn't like most writing. But he especially doesn't like books that have plots, because if a book has a plot, a beginning, a middle and an end, then the writer is pretending that the world is known, and telling the reader that the world is known, that the universe is known, when in fact it is not known. And we're not a known development.

What we can most see in this century is not that we made automobiles and computers but that we saw gaps in our knowledge; about biology, about psychology, about our humanism indeed about the world, the universe. We learnt our lack of knowledge in this century. We learnt uncertainty against the certainty that we had before. When we look at the history of this century we learnt that we truly are perverse.

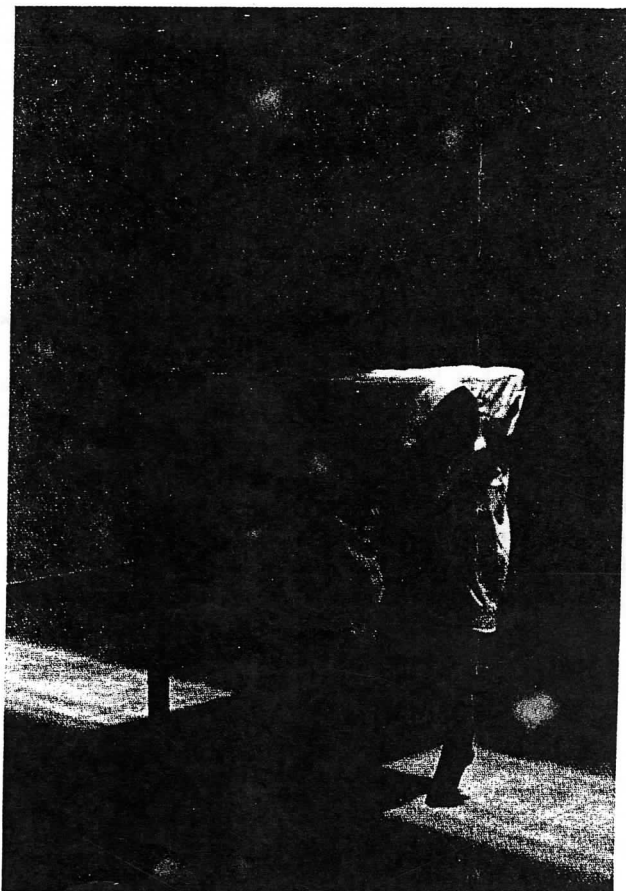
Let me say something about chimpanzees. We said for the first half of this century, that chimpanzees were just animals, and that was it. And then we said, no they're like us, they're very kind and they're very social. And then we kept studying over just the past fifteen, twenty years and we said, yes they're just like us. They're murdering bastards. And they're cute and sweet. We come from a perverse group of animals, the primates are a ridiculous crowd. And among the primates we seem to be the most ridiculous, but very primate-like all the same, very much like everyone else. In this century we began to learn biological uncertainty, we learnt of our incompleteness. And we learnt that we're not good, that we're not bad. There's not already a known factor about us, everything is to be discovered. And it's probably not going to work, because we probably won't have time. Why do you want to know something about twenty billion crazy monkeys getting in in each others face? There's nothing very interesting there, except the consequent suffering and the squalor. At least, we now are frightened by the various problems. We're probably not going to work them out. We're probably not going to amount to anything.

There's a literary device, that science fiction writers use, that's called in the U.S. "if this continues, if this goes on". And it's a mechanism that a science fiction writer can use. He says, or she says: "All right there are five billion people and then there will be ten billion people. And if this goes on then there will be hundreds of billions of people. And I can write a story about these hundreds of billions of people." So, it's easy to write a book that way. But it's back to what Naipaul is complaining about, as though the universe was known. Because it pretends that the future will be similar to the present, only more. The writer pretends to prophecy, so we can see what it would be like. It would be like now, only more, instead of a few seats filled, every place would be filled.

It looks like the complacency of fear. But it is a complacency of fear that makes us stupid and we continue. And our main project, which is to be stupid, to be more stupid, to be more inhuman, to forget that there might be something, that we can call the: human project. That's a continuing secondary project, that homo sapiens have, that probably will take us over, as I can see.

Let's look at the future! When I stack up my evidence about it, I don't see one, or I rather don't see one that I might like. But that's the same, if I saw one that I did like, it would be the same, I think. And it's what Gertrude Stein said just after the First World War. She explained how the generals of Europe, the military leaders, knew that the First World War was going to be different from the wars of the century before. And they knew that they had to prepare for a different kind of war. And that's what they all tried to do. And what they did instead was to prepare for the wars of the century before, because they didn't know how to prepare for something unknown. They knew something unknown would happen. But you can't prepare for something unknown. You can only prepare for what is known, which is preparing for the past. And then you get something completely unsatisfactory.

So, if there are artists who say, usually very sentimentally: "My work is for



Jimmie Durham, *Untitled*, 1995. Wood, cotton and text.

the future, or "I work for the future", it's a pretty arrogant statement, isn't it? It's strange kind of arrogance.

Then there's the arrogance of working for the present, even if the artist doesn't say: "I'm working for the present". The artist might say something New York flip: "I don't care about these philosophical ramblings" or "I don't care about all this confusion and angst about art. I do my work now, I have my

shows, blah, blah, blah." You heard the Rev. That's not something that we can easily tolerate as artists, from ourselves. We can't easily tolerate that kind of monstrosity. That's the only thing I can call it, this cute, cheerful monstrosity.

When I'm interviewed for articles and newspapers or something, there's usually the question: "Why did I take up art?" If the interviewer knows that I'm a political activist and that I have been a political activist full time, the question is: "Why did I take up art?" This is a little subtle and it may seem that if I make something of nothing, I think I'm not. If I were, if I were European, if I were some normal artist, if I were normal American, the opposite question might well be asked instead: "Why did you take up politics?" You see the difference. And this is for me the more correct question, the question why did I take up politics, as a full time activist, since I was already an artist, since making art was my primary goal, I don't know what project, what employment, my role in life may be.

I started doing political work full-time in the early seventies, because there wasn't a choice at first. The U.S. put American Indians in a situation, where we had to respond. And we just had to respond, whether we liked it or not. We had been in that situation at other times in our history with the U.S. When you are forced to respond, you must. But second, besides being a clear responsibility that I couldn't ignore, I thought we would win. I thought we would win our political goals, perhaps by the mid eighties. It looked like we could win. This was a time, when so much of Africa had just gotten out from under European colonialism, so much of Africa was just about to. And the most horrible aspects of neo-colonialism and de-colonialism hadn't happened fully yet. We thought we might get somewhere. Instead we lost more than we started with. We went backwards in time and history. By the time Reagan came in, in the eighties, we lost more than I can imagine. We can never return to this point.

The question, why did I take up art, implies that, since I'm from an oppressed people, a colonized people, politics is my proper job. And therefore I do art,

of answers and bring the answers to the body. Then there is not a possibility for the artist to do anything except make gesture after gesture after gesture. And we all get bored, but we all pretend we're not bored. And we all pretend we're interested, because it is art. And that is what we all wished we loved.

I have a friend in Gent, who says that I'm always explaining things as though the situation was colonial and as though that mattered. And he tells other people: "Jimmie always throws in the word colonial, and it doesn't really matter. It's just a word he likes." Well, he's my friend. So I won't hit him, until I can find a way to hit him, properly. The colonial reality is the only reality we have. All of our thoughts are a consequence of colonial structure; the universe we live in, to the extent that it is known, is known through this colonial mentality.

When you watch television, you watch a colonial situation. I watched a simple little show a few days ago at CNN, and some American, white man, about my age, was talking to three, so-called 'third world' television journalists, much younger. And he was being very nice to them, very understanding and very gentle, just like a colonial father. And they were taking it in, they were believing him. And when you see it there, I think people who are watching the show didn't say: "Jesus, look at this colonial set-up I'm seeing. It's intolerable." I think people said: "Hmm, they're saying some stupid things, it's television. It's neutral television. It's nothing to do with colonialism."

I can't make art that says: colonialism is bad, but we can, we can make an art system, that takes into account, that we are trapped in this stupidity that's not good for us. That tells us how to see the world and it's not the way that the world will be. When I think of how I might make good art, if I could make good art, I think of writers more than I think of artists. Because I don't like most art.

But having started the process of moving to Dublin I've been re-reading James Joyce's book of short stories called "Dubliners", which I enjoyed thirty years ago. But reading it now, I'm really struck by how perfect and how sharp

his hatred of Dublin is. And how his hatred of his fellow Dubliners makes him write such brilliant stories, that contribute something to the life of Ireland through his hatred of their intolerable stupidity. There's not one story that's cute. There's not one story that gives anyone a break in Dublin. There's not one story that celebrates the Irish people. He wrote these before or during the First World War, when Ireland was in serious trouble with England, when people were suffering. He didn't give them a break. He wasn't interested in explaining to them, or to the world, or to himself any sentimentality, or any hope. He only wanted to say: "I hate this stupidity and I have to write this hatred. I have to attack this stupidity. I hate my people this way, and this way, and this way and this way." And he lays it all out in "Dubliners". If I could be that sharp, and if I could somehow start a discourse in the art world, where that might be seen as a possibility, not on such a literal level, because we are not talking about writing. We are talking about something, we don't even know yet, something that we don't know how to do, as visual art.

I'm going to end with the not knowing how. I'm going to end with the lack of hope. Because I'm from the U.S., I have a more sharp problem with hope. The U.S. is famous for calling itself a nation, and a government built on law, not on men. For us this is a special, acute problem, because American Indians have law on our side. We have treaties with the U.S. And the supreme court over the years has upheld the fact of the treaties, and the nature of the treaties, that these are treaties between governments, between countries, between the Cherokee nation and the U.S. nation for example. And the law is not upheld. And all of this century we have been imagining, that if we got sharp enough lawyers or a sympathetic enough jury, the law will be upheld and it never has been. So, after having gone through centuries of military defeat and death by every imaginable kind of genocide, then we have to come to the point.

How might we do something in the U.S.? The U.S. is against the law. The

because we lost politically. In other words, that the first level of fighting for me is, and should be politics, and the second level might be literature, or writing, or art, or music, or something. But that's only an assumption made about third world people. The opposite assumption is not made for Europeans, for white folks, in general. So it's a subtle difference. But it's an important difference, isn't it? I think art is my primary thing. It's not a way of doing politics. It's not a way of fighting the whites. There aren't any clear political goals to my art work. But it would be a little silly to say, here I would do this art and over here is politics. And to say you can't mix art and politics, that's a very silly thing. Someone has told us to say: You can't mix this with that. You can't mix this category with that category. And the people, that made the categories, have told us that you can't mix them. And these are not just some people sitting up somewhere. It's the 'states'. You know what I mean by the people?

I want all art to be political. My art has to be political, but it doesn't have to be political. It's just, the point is to integrate instead of to separate. The point is to make some coherency instead of contributing to this inhumanity, that I was talking about earlier.

I wonder now, especially these days, how I can make art. And I wonder how any of us can make art. I'm working on two big shows now in Europe. And I don't have a clue about what I'm doing and how to do it. I think, not because I'm an Indian artist, but rather because I'm not. Not because I don't know how to make art, that will reach people. But we're in a situation, that we don't even know, what art might be for us. The framework is there. You can't interrupt the framework. We recently tried that in a group show in Marseille, to do art work that hadn't a sign of art to it, except that it was in a commercial gallery. Well, that word 'except' has implications. Because people came to the commercial gallery knowing they would see art, that didn't look like art. Art that has a sign "not art" is a kind of art now isn't it? We all know that sign, "this is not art".



Jimmie Durham, *Self-Portrait Entering Europe*.

If I make some art, that really has no art sign and I put it in a place, that has no art sign, no one could see it. I can't make magic art. No one can make magic art.

There is a set of art discourses, as we all know. And we all know that now they aren't serving us well. They are not working. And we live in a time, where nothing is probably going to work. If, as an artist, I interrupt the discourse, and say: "No, no I don't want to talk about that. I don't want to talk about this, that I just made." It's only an interruption. And I think we have to be responsible and take ourselves seriously enough as artists to do something more than interrupt, because it can't be heard and an interruption is just an interruption. If we can, instead steer the conversation over to some other place and then, if someone picks up that approach, then we can see how we might work. In other words we can see ways out of our art crisis, only in social situations, in art discourses, not in the private arrogance contained in our own brains. For each of us to think

law won't work for us, no matter what. We can't convince the public of our just cause. And we can't take up guns and drive them back over here. And people say: "Do you think the Cherokee language can maintain itself and develop itself?" And I say: I don't see how and I don't think so. Because it's not taught in schools. It's not spoken at home. And there is television. Electricity now means television and television means American shows, American languages, and it's not in the Cherokee languages and it's not our television. And then people say: "Well, do you think you can maintain yourselves culturally as Cherokees?". And I say: No, I don't think so, for the very same reasons. We are more and more dispersed. We are more and more inter-married. We are more and more this, that and the other. And I can't imagine a place, where we can be, even in the next generation, in the next twenty-five years, but certainly not in the next hundred years. I don't see any Cherokees in the future in the next hundred years, or Apaches, or Sioux, or Comanches.

In other words I'm in the same position, that my great grandfather was in. And here I'm saying that. There however is a way in which he didn't quite lose his battle, even though it would seem in every way that you can look at, he lost.

What we see now with law, is that it's not working, because criminality has become the new plague of the world. And the law can't take care of it any more. It doesn't matter, if genocide is against the law, it never has. It doesn't matter if serial murdering is against the law. It doesn't matter if rape is against the law. All these crimes are growing. All these crimes are multiplying. But the law is based on an older system. The law is based on torture, medieval torture in Europe. The law is based on that. Act the way the state tells you to, or the state will burn you, cut off your hand, or whip you, or something bad. That's where the law comes from. It's breaking down now. And whilst I don't have any hope we don't know, what's going to happen.

If we make art, as though we know what's going to happen, whether it is



Jimmie Durham, An approach in fear and love, 1992. Mixed media.

hopeful or cynical, we're not working on an art project - we're working against an art project! Only with a great uncertainty and with a great deal of dialogue about that uncertainty can some, very small achievements be made for some future that we can not see or imagine. We have to work in strange ways and hopeless ways but not cynical ways. Not the naivety of cynicalness, which puts us in the same boat, which puts us all in the colonial boat. All in a boat where we can say: "Well, we'll go for that swim and we're probably going to drown. It's probably not going to work!"

The text is a transcript from a speech held at the IAAC Congress