

Koh, Germaine. "Jimmie Durham." *Crossings*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1998: 108-113.

71. *Bedia's Stirring Wheel* (1985). Aluminum, leather, fur, paint, feathers, skull, string, plastic, cloth, steering wheel. Private collection, Cincinnati

70. *Self-portrait* (1986). Canvas, wood, paint, metal, synthetic hair, fur, feathers, shell, turquoise, thread. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

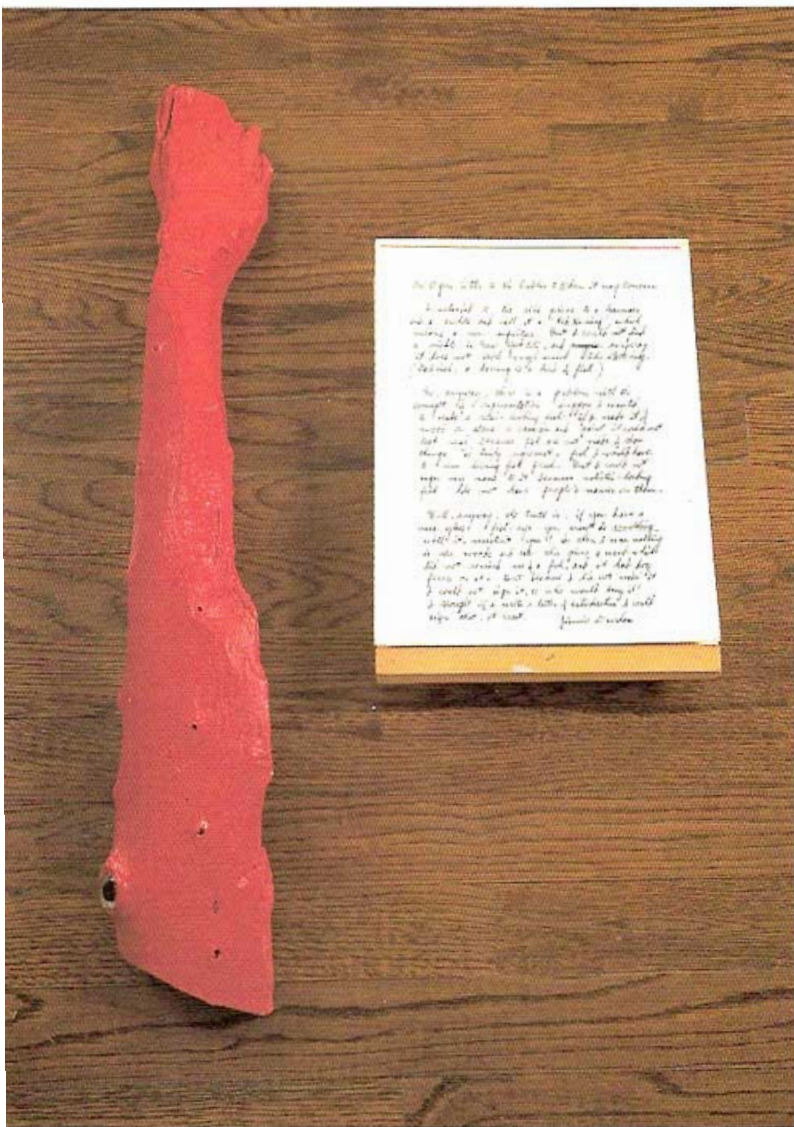
Jimmie Durham's work is both devastating and disarming. Cobbling together found materials with self-deprecating wit, he builds into his quirky *bricolages* an acute consciousness of the difficulty of making and meaning, and the impossibility of authentic expression.

Humour has always been a catalyst in these concoctions. A good early example is *Bedia's Stirring Wheel* (1985), made a few years after Durham's return to art-making, having concentrated on social activism as a leader of the American Indian Movement for most of the 1970s. *Bedia's Stirring Wheel* is from a body of fetishistic faux Indian artefacts that spoof not only the colonizer's misunderstandings of Native peoples, but also Native internalizations of these stereotypes. In a parodic reversal of known colonial relationships, Durham efficiently deflates the pomposity of misguided ethnographic assertions by means of new pop-cultural caricatures. A steering wheel wrapped with bits of fur and leather and decorated with feathers, bones, and an effigy of the Disney character Pluto, grows from a birch trunk propped upright in a car wheel, as a portentous lectern. A museological caption presents it as an artefact uncovered in the distant future by the fictional José Bedia (a name appropriated from a real Cuban artist) in his study of the legendary "Plane White People":

"Bedia, the famous Cuban explorer/archaeologist, discovered this stirring wheel, sometimes referred to as the 'Fifth' or 'Big' wheel, during his second excavation of the ruins at White Planes in 3290 AD.

He believes that the stirring wheel was a symbol of office for the Great White Father, often called 'The Man Behind the Wheel'. Bedia claims that the chief would stand behind the wheel to make pronouncements and stirring speeches."





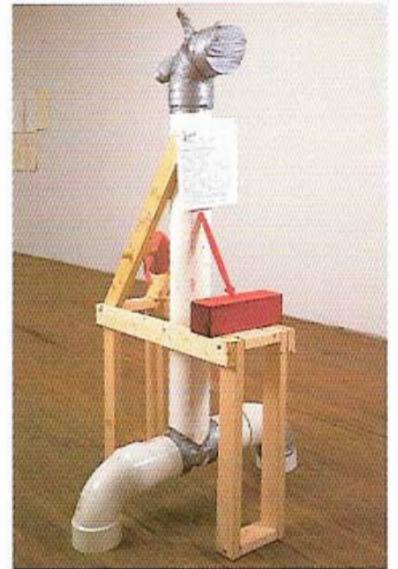
72. Red Herring (1992). Wood, paint, glass eye, paper

Through its critical humour, Durham's work points very seriously to the ways in which Native American self-determination is conditioned by stereotypes that may be more forceful and foundational than any other source of Indian identity. His tongue-in-cheek adoption of naïve ("primitive") personae and the deliberate ungainliness of his objects are shrewd means of deconstructing these stereotypes by pursuing them to their necessary conceptual conclusion, that "a 'savage' can't – or won't – make 'fine' art."<sup>1</sup> Durham avers that "as an authorized savage, it is my custom and my job to attack."<sup>2</sup> Still, his joking may partake of a *genuine* Native practice of humour, perhaps related to the traditional trickster character Coyote. As Lucy Lippard puts it:

"Quietly laughing at white people has long been an Indian pastime rarely acknowledged or understood by its targets. It has proved an enduring weapon against the theft of almost everything, and constitutes a hard-core deconstructive tradition. Durham plays his part in this history of tricksterism and deadpan subversion with disconcerting honesty."<sup>3</sup>

Durham is also willing to vouch that Native humour is inevitable: "I think we are, of necessity and natural bent, funny people."<sup>4</sup> Recognizing this tradition of wit over against more standard definitions of Indianness may advance an alternative form of self-determination, one that acknowledges the extent to which even positive expressions of Native cultures are essentially defensive.

Of late, working outside the United States (he left in 1987, moving first to Mexico and then to Europe), Durham's work has focused even more pointedly on acts of representing and making, and on the question of authenticity, but deflected from his own identity. Whereas his earlier work was occupied with undermining established representations of Natives, lately he has abandoned self-presentation in favour of wide-ranging parables about authentic representation. In the former mode, he produced an ironic *Self-Portrait* (1986), whose flayed-hide-like figure was marked with voices uttering clichés of Indian identity:



"Hello! I'm Jimmie Durham. I want to explain a few things about myself ... I am willing and able to do a wide variety of jobs.... Indian penises are unusually large and colorful.... My skin is not really this dark, but I am sure that many Indians have coppery skin.... Mr. Durham has stated that he believes he has an addiction to alcohol, nicotine, caffeine; and does not sleep well."

In the more recent, overtly scrupulous mode of speaking about acts of representation, he has produced a series of works in the imagined character of Shakespeare's noble savage Caliban (see fig. 15 and 16). These convey the inability of the colonized to recognize himself except as a reflection of his oppressor – his only link to his true identity. For a 1992 work he sunk a glass fish eye into a clublike piece of found wood, painted it bright red, and placed near it "An Open Letter to the Public to Whom it may Concern." The text outlines in neat handwriting fanciful half-justifications for representing,

choosing, not-really-making, and presenting this unassuming *Red Herring*; finally concluding, "I thought if I wrote a letter of introduction I could sign that, at least." Durham's preoccupation with representational practices reaches wide: some of his assemblages bear scientific narratives which cannot help but appear as earnestly unsophisticated attempts to formulate how objects come to be in the world.

More than anything else, it is Durham's sensitivity to languages (untranslated Cherokee puns also crop up in his work) and familiarity with diverse cultural paradigms that rebuff simple attempts to locate him. The sculpture *Janus* (1992) seems to warn against fixed beliefs of any kind, whether about the artist or his intentions, about art's animistic or enriching qualities, or about interpretation itself. The rough yet charismatic figure, crafted from PVC pipe held together and muffled by duct-tape, and held

1. Lucy Lippard, "Jimmie Durham: Postmodernist 'Savage,'" *Art in America* (Feb 1993), p. 68.
2. Jimmie Durham 1988 statement cited in Lucy Lippard, op. cit., p. 68.
3. Lucy Lippard, "Little Red Lies," *Jimmie Durham: The Bishop's Moose and the Pinkerton Men* (New York: Exit Art, 1989), p. 28.
4. Jimmie Durham statement in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art / New Museum of Contemporary Art / Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), cited in Richard Shiff, "The Necessity of Jimmie Durham's Jokes," *Third Text* (Fall 1992), p. 77.
5. Translated by Durham from José Saramago, *O Ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* (Lisbon: Editorial Caminho, 1984). Available in English as *The year of the death of Ricardo Reis*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991).
6. Letter to the author, 15 July 1997.

74. *The Aharanov-Bohm Effect* (1989).  
Wood, paint, leather, in two parts



erect by a chunky two-by-four structure, is like a sentinel bearing a typeset sign and a coin box. Its text seems to record a contest of wills between art object and artist, leading inexorably to an inability to believe or act:

"Good / afternoon. / Would you please pretend for a few moments that it is actually me, the piece of art, that is talking to you?

I just think it may be easier to explain myself directly: I am a representation of Janus, the two-faced god. Please do not confuse my double-ness with duplicity, however, or with 'pail-faces who speak with forked tongues'....

Anyway, I am the guardian. Seeing, as it were, with future hindsight and historical foresight, I must naturally attempt both action and the blockage of action.... You can see, then, dear spectator, that I am also the god of passage, and the god of unification of opposites.

Sorry, folks! This is the artist Jimmie Durham interrupting here! as soon as Janus mentioned opposites I could see he was going in the wrong direction. Humans and their gods seem to naturally create opposites-as-a-system....

May I suggest that we imagine systems in opposition to any concept of opposites?

Thank you for your patience. (But you still have to pay.)"

Ultimately, Durham's eccentric art is one of active reserve. Accepting that willful misunderstandings and mistranslations – fictions, in other words – are at the heart of all representation, he prefers a position that evades fixity, that is occupied instead with the

task of exploding claims to authenticity. A small 1995 (*Acha que minto...*, fig. 35) work borrows an excerpt from the Portuguese novelist José Saramago, copied in its original language onto a card planted onto a small log, as a modest reminder of the coexistence of truth and deceit within all representation: "Do you say I am lying? Certainly not, we have never lied to each other; when precision limits us, we use words to lie for us."<sup>5</sup> As much as Durham avoids unconditional assertion, his description of this intrepid and gentle little piece could stand as a summation of his own project: "Its only 'power' is in its absurd and hopeful furtiveness."<sup>6</sup> G.K.