

*Dear Jimmie Durham, Dear John Citizen: I would like to ask you about contemporary art and politics*

**Darren Jorgensen**

Dear Jimmie Durham,

For the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, you were commissioned to make a work of art. You picked out a red Ford Festiva from a second-hand car lot, a hatchback, placed it in front of the Sydney Opera House and dropped a boulder on top of it. The boulder had a ridiculous face painted onto it, a half-smile warped by the lean of the surface of the rock. You gave nature a face, a face that appeared all too naive, like an oversized infant who has pulled apart something precious. She stares at her accuser, stares back at the smiling, standing Sydney crowd. For her, it is as if nothing has happened, as if she is not responsible for her own weight and mass. This spectacle, *Still Life with Stone and Car* (2004), was but one of several in a series that you made, Jimmie Durham, of works that collide stones and vehicles. In 2007, a big sedan, a Dodge Spirit, suffered the same fate, as you crushed it with a lava boulder in Mexico. Like the Festiva, it now sits lifeless on a city street, passed by moving, breathing, polluting cars. You also crushed a small plane. I saw it on the cover of *Artforum* (Durham, 2009). It's the kind of thing *Artforum* like - big, friendly and smart, by a big name in the art world making a spectacular, interesting scene. This is what I wanted to ask you about, Jimmie Durham. How is it that an artist who is so well known as a political artist can become an artist making the kind of big, spectacular works that art world institutions, such as Biennales and museums, really like. I wanted to ask you about contemporary art and its logics.

I cannot help but look for the politics in this Sydney work, in this crushed hatchback. *The Sydney Morning Herald* tells me that you chose a Ford, rather than a Japanese model, because you did not want to make 'some strange political statement' (Anon, 2004). I am not quite sure what you meant by this, or even if you actually said it, since newspapers tend to mangle things. It might have something to do with being from America. The *Herald* report that you said, 'This is just art' about *Still Life with Stone and Car* (Anon, 2004). The art world is used to such statements, but not from artists known for their politics. You were, after all, an activist in the American Indian Movement, and your art has often been interpreted as having something to do with representations of the people of the First Nations in North America. Gerald R. McMaster has described yours as an activist art after Lucy Lippard's definition of activist art, as being involved with causes, rather than just commentating upon them (1995: 85). The way that you toyed with representations of American Indian iconography in the works you made in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to a whole raft of debates within postcolonialism. You also wrote extensively of the situations and subjectivities of colonisation. All of this makes me wonder what you are trying to do today with *Still Life with Stone and Car*, that at first glance has little to do with such provocative, political projects. The depoliticisation of artwork is a part of the regular train of events, but not from artists who are known to also be activists. Have you joined the legion of apolitical artists? Has success at last lured you into the post-political? You have however written of the history of one of your smashed airplanes, a history that certainly sounds political. You write that 'The airplane was in working condition and would have been sold in Africa - though it was considered unsafe in Europe' (Durham, 2009: 189). Why do you declare both that there is no politics in these works, and yet know the history of these vehicles, which is a political history?

Influential art historians such as Jonathan Crary (1991), Hal Foster (2002) and Donald Kuspit (2004) have lamented the post-political state of contemporary art. In *The End of Art* (2004), perhaps the most unforgiving account of contemporary art

yet, Donald Kuspit says that contemporary art is no longer art, that it is in fact 'postart', a term that he steals from performance artist Allan Kaprow, who thought that the end of art would be a good thing. This end is not a good thing for Kuspit, for whom 'postart' describes the kind of fleeting, impermanent interest demanded by advertising and entertainment culture. People in the West are no longer capable of contemplating aesthetic niceties, as Kuspit would have us do, and so art becomes banal and undemanding. The essence of art has been horribly eroded by a mass culture that no longer produces art that is worthy of the name. Jean Baudrillard makes a more precise argument in 'The Conspiracy of Art' by saying that contemporary art occupies the place of art without actually being art, carrying on the art tradition without actually being that which it claims to be (2005). Art now simulates an experience that is historically outmoded, and the idea of art carries on in spite of its own exhaustion. Another French theorist, Guy Debord, thinks that art today simply does not exist (1988: xvii). At a glance, *Still Life with Stone and Car* seems to be but one more instance of the kind of spectacular art produced within an accelerated media culture, a contemporary art that is complicit with a market driven image culture.

The most prominent examples of this kind of 'postart' are the works of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, the most commercially successful artists of the 1980s and 1990s. They make post-pop, post-conceptual work, but theirs is also very cynical stuff. Their works also exemplify this idea of a spectacular contemporary art, as they are often expensive to make, big and crowd pleasing. Another description for their work might be the 'one-liner', what one market journalist has called 'single-thought conceptual art' (Robertson 2009: 12). Like a joke, these one-liners capture momentary attention and are quickly understood. Art historians complain that this kind of contemporary art is quasi-historical, as it reduces problems of representation and production that have long been a part of European art history to simplistic formulas. So that Koons' *Rabbit* (1986) reworks the minimalist problem of space by transforming this neo-avant-garde's use of reflective surfaces into a kitsch bunny rabbit. And Hirst's *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1992), a vitrine that features a great white shark, reworks the theme of death, long a topic of modern art, into a banal spectacle of the postmodern era. The joke of contemporary art turns out to be an in-joke, as its humour rests upon what we already expect of art.

Art historians like Kuspit shake their heads not only at the one-liners that are so often the institutional and market leaders in contemporary art, but at the Biennales that stand as the most visible forums for showcasing contemporary art today. The Sydney Biennale, where you showed *Still Life with Stone and Car*, Jimmie Durham, is one such attempt to represent the various practices of art around the world. Yet in desperately attempting to expand the notion of contemporary art to be internationally inclusive, Biennales generally succeed only in developing another genre of contemporary art that is itself produced for the Biennale (Butler 2009: 251). The one-liners that proliferate in the contemporary art world make their jokes at the expense of difference at Biennales, as they reproduce already received representations of cultures and globalities. At the 2006 Sydney Biennale, for instance, Anthony Gormley commissioned a group of Chinese workers to make 180,000 hand-made figurines for his *Asian Field*, filling a warehouse space with an uncanny multitude of clay faces. Or Andreas Gursky, whose work was on show at the 2000 Sydney Biennale, produces large, high resolution images that perform a metaphorical idea of a vast globality, showing rubbish dumps and racing tracks, apartment buildings and stock market floors. The effect of these works is to reproduce already dominant metaphors for globalisation, in which the sublime idea of a massively populated world reappears in visual form. The substitution of Gormley's spectacular installation and Gursky's large-scale photography for an idea of the world serves to aggrandise those artists who are able to simulate its grandness. Ideologically, the Biennale becomes a site

at which the privileges of imperialism reasserts themselves, in a singularity of vision that embraces the world.

Yet you, Jimmie Durham, made *Still Life with Stone and Car* for this very situation, for a Biennale of Sydney that wants to promote works by Gormley and Gursky as the best of contemporary art in the world today. And now I hear that you are living in Berlin. My students move to Berlin to be artists, they think that the secrets of contemporary art lie there. Has this contemporary context at last allowed you to escape the identity politics that once pigeonholed your work, and to join the mainstream art world? Does the ambivalence of much contemporary art toward its content realise the utopian, post-political space that your politics has been driving toward? I sense something more going on than this. I get the feeling that you are not so much making another spectacular piece of contemporary, global art as playing with this new genre. I want to understand what makes *Still Life with Stone and Car* different from these other pieces, quite simply because I like the work, am attracted by it. I smile at it, certainly, but it also makes me think about it, for reasons that I do not fully understand.

As someone working with art history, I want to understand this work. I also have a methodology that should help me. This methodology tells me to search for the continuities between *Still Life with Stone and Car* and your previous works. Certainly the car refunctions the discarded remains of both nature and civilisation, like those iconic, post-Native American works you used to make. Remember when you painted animal skulls and placed them amidst water piping, signposts and other structures? These appropriations of nature, and especially animalistic ones, seemed to recall your Cherokee background, as their pagan dimension echoes with the way in which the idea of the American Indian has been constructed by history. You have described what you were doing most succinctly and helpfully in the context of contemporary art:

I did it as postmodern work, animal skulls as part of my tradition, you can't say it's a bad tradition. And I wasn't doing it traditionally, I wasn't making new folk art. I was trying to interrupt what I perceived as a very closed, very satisfied and self-congratulatory discourse on Postmodernism. I felt like New York art in the 80s was not speaking to the times, was not being contemporary, was being nostalgic without admitting that, without knowing that. (Durham, 1995: 17)

This use of animal skulls, and their resonance with tradition, was in a dialogue with postmodernism, with a view to the potentiality of this postmodernism to be truly contemporary. Yet when contemporary art became the dominant global discourse, when it superseded postmodernism as a kind of catch-all for art practice, this notion of contemporary art also changed. Now contemporary art is constituted by a different set of different generic practices, such as the spectacular, that appear to be just as limiting as postmodernism once was.

In your 1985 work, *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian*, you showed some of the paradoxes that come from practices of representation. Jean Fisher tells us that viewers assumed that your collection of artefacts was in fact a genuine exhibition of artefacts, mistaking it for an actual museum display. For these viewers, the representation of Native American life became the thing itself, the actuality of Native American life (Fisher, 2002: 47). Undermining representations turns into a positive representation, turns all too easily into an inescapable politics of identity. The irony here is that by mistaking ironic critique for sincerity, these viewers of *On Loan* also confirm that the actuality of the Native American is only ever a construction. The identikit of the Native American is the truth of this category of the colonial.

The problem crops up, once again, in your 1987 *Self-Portrait*. One of my favourite art historians, Richard Shiff, tells us of this life-sized body that has been written all over, that this 'body is alienated from itself' (1992: 79). This is the kind of problematic that the art world has embraced in your work, as you present that which you both are and are not at the same time, so that one critic, Judy Purdom, can write:

Durham acknowledges both the inescapability of his modern identity and his heritage as a Cherokee without fixing on or rejecting either. He plays with the disparity between authorities of identity, remaining within them but not defined by any of them and so shows up the designation 'American Indian' as a fictional identity. (Purdom 1994: 173)

These are the concerns of an art world thinking that it was liberated from modernism, and celebrating the multiplicity of representations and their flux. Yet there is something else going on here, too. I think Jaki Irvine puts her finger on the pulse of the problem by turning a representation into a positive idea when she describes the 'ambivalence' of your work towards its own representations (1994: 181). It is not so much that you are representing Native American content because you are a Native American. Instead, the fact that you are using one set of materials and not another, that you are born into one situation and not another, leads you to make this kind of work at this particular time.

Is this kind of ambivalence at work within *Still Life with Stone and Car*? Perhaps in this work you are ambivalent about this new genre of spectacular, contemporary art. This is what you said about these pieces:

I remember how, after Sydney, the car pieces became popular - people enjoy seeing a car get what's coming to it - and I ended up making a few versions, which are similar in the way that paintings are similar. But when Christo and Jean-Claude started wrapping things, they could not know that they would spend the next fifty years going around the world looking for new and bigger things to wrap. I can imagine myself in a similar predicament - this phenomenon is so often equated with success. It can be relatively easy to find bigger ships, bigger airplanes, bigger boulders. A stoned Concorde might have a sense of appropriateness. But without a good business manager I would not know where to show it. (2009: 89)

It would be interesting to see a stoned Concorde, although perhaps the idea of it is enough. Would it say more about contemporary art, or something different, to a stoned car? The scale of destruction (and creation) would certainly demonstrate, in a way that no non-sensational work could, the ultimate ambivalence of the contemporary art world toward the content of its art. A stoned Concorde would not only be expensive and excessive, but doubly so, as the Concorde is an already expensive and excessive product. Its doubled excesses would compare to Hirst's diamond skull, *For the Love of God* (2007), whose value in diamonds is value-added by its value as contemporary art. You mention a business manager, because such art demonstrates, beyond any doubt, the entwined worlds of high commerce and spectacular contemporary art. Isn't Hirst also playing this game of ambivalence? Making certain kinds of work because he is in a position to do so?

I am going to suspend this letter here, Jimmie Durham, because I want to write to another artist I admire. This is John Citizen. Have you heard of him? He is an Australian artist, and I think that his other name is Gordon Bennett. Your *Still Life with Stone and Car* makes me think of John Citizen's recent paintings. They too contain a kind of ambivalence toward their own content, and fit neatly into the many ambivalences of contemporary art. Citizen has worked hard to make his work ambivalent, despite being laden by a politicised, Aboriginal identity that was

constructed by Gordon Bennett. Today, I suspect that neither of you want to be known as Indigenous artists, and I apologise for bunching you together like this, in a shared struggle to elude identity politics that can only return to constructing your identities. Yet my intuitive liking for both *Still Life with Stone and Car* and the paintings of John Citizen, my interest in the way that they are doing something with this idea of contemporary art, makes me want to carry on with thinking about your works alongside each other. Perhaps, after all, the true subject of contemporary art is not the contemporary itself, but that which the contemporary excludes in order to become contemporary. In your comments on your stoned vehicles and in the vehicles themselves, between the national affiliations of hatchbacks and the vehicle itself, there lies a tension between political representations and the desire to escape this politics through works that are spectacular. I think I can understand your work better by writing to John Citizen, if only to return to the problem that you share, which might be the problem of contemporary art and its ambivalences.

Dear John Citizen,

Who is Gordon Bennett, John Citizen? I have already written to Jimmie Durham to accuse him of not being himself, but at least he has retained his own name. I know that you are not really John Citizen, and that you were previously known as Gordon Bennett. I thought I knew Gordon Bennett. At least I had seen his art. Yet John Citizen no longer paints the things that Bennett did, those figurative deconstructions of art and art history, deconstructions that also show the racist violence upon which Australia was founded. When I was about 20 I saw Gordon Bennett's painting *Contemplation* (1993) in an art magazine somewhere, and it changed the world for me. You might remember it shows an angel staring into a painted black square. At the time I thought that *Contemplation* was actually a painting of Malevich's *Black Square* (1923-29). I also thought that *Black Square* was the greatest painting in the world (not that I had ever seen it). The black square in *Contemplation* reminded me of it, and seemed to deconstruct my own situation, as I sat in Australia, distant from the great works of European art, staring into their blackness.

When I was about 30 I saw Gordon Bennett's paintings interspersed amongst the colonial works at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), his critiques of colonialism sitting amidst the colonial paintings. I was impressed not only by these paintings, but by the curatorial bravery of the NGV, to show the racist violence implicit in the very art that they were showing. The NGV appeared to have answered to the demand that Aboriginal views be represented within colonial history. But thinking more on this, I realised that this was more an interruption than a revolution. Gordon Bennett's paintings remained outnumbered by the colonial ones, making his grotesque, violent scenes appear angry and tokenistic amidst a gallery dominated by the picturesque. A proper rewriting of Australian art history, one that was more sensitive to the colonised, would require that the colonial genre be locked away from public view. For as Gordon Bennett's postcolonial images show, the Australian picturesque is imbued with racist violence. In the hands of Australian curators, the colonial genre of painting is as offensive as classical sculpture is in the hands of the Nazis. Colonial painting should be locked away as an embarrassment to contemporary Australians, as it belies the violence made possible by the colonial gaze upon the land. Gordon Bennett's paintings thus function to provoke a national and art historical debate about Australian art. Perhaps this is why John Citizen has come about, has sought anonymity above and beyond the Australian scene. Is Gordon Bennett the construction of a history that John Citizen is trying to elude?

John Citizen, in 1995 you made your first works, a series of oil paintings on paper, showing whip marks on skin. Their clearly designed barbs, and bright colours of skin and blood, give them a light, beautiful appearance. They signal the violence of

colonialism, Gordon Bennett's customary subject, but conflate them with the innocence of beauty. In the twenty-first century, John Citizen, this combination returns, as you concoct a series of domestic *Interiors* (2005-). These paintings of suburban lounge rooms, kitchens and bedrooms appear at first glance to lack the biting critique that distinguished Bennett's postcolonial work. They are almost senile paintings, of boldly coloured living spaces that have been cleaned of signs of life. Yet I see something else in them too, a double-coding, as within the clashing colours of lounge chairs, tables and pictures on the wall, the spectre of colonial violence lingers like a toxin. For here is the contemporary picturesque, that says more by not saying, that represents by merely presenting, the living styles of Australian home decorator magazines and salesrooms. They simulate the recursive gaze of the contemporary commodity. As they show decoration, these paintings also decorate. As they mimic the place of art in the contemporary world, at home in the home, they become this contemporary art. Their Ikea appearance (McLean 2006) could well be mistaken for an Ikea product.

One thing that troubles me about these works is that, from what I can see, they are also commercially successful. Collectors in the art world have been buying them, presumably to hang within their own interiors. It is not as if they can't see the game you are playing, as many of these paintings bear signs that lend themselves to a postcolonial thinking, and even contain signs that recall Gordon Bennett's own deconstructive works. In the paintings on the walls of these *Interiors*, paintings that reproduce other paintings, are images that symbolise the repressions that make this sterile utopia possible. Works such as *Interior (Bedroom)*, 9 Jan 2007 and *Interior (Fish)*, 16 Jan 2007, feature other paintings of nature, trees and fish, whose images are frozen into interior design. I can also follow the colours from these paintings back into these interiors themselves, to see that their brown and white colours are also the colours of shelving, table and lounge chairs. These interiors are made of the stuff of nature, wood and metal. They are at once utopian, the spaces that realise the kind of contemporary postart of which Kuspit complains (see my letter to Jimmie Durham), and yet written into them are the materials of the world.

There is something that troubles me more about these works, that leads me to return to them again and again. It is the same thing that troubled me about Gordon Bennett's *Contemplation*. Would I have been so blown away by this painting if I had not been told that Gordon Bennett was Aboriginal? I might instead have identified with the angel who floats in contemplation of the darkness, might have simply taken the work as a meditation upon looking itself. Instead, the black square became interchangeable with Gordon Bennett's Aboriginal identity (for this I had been told), so that the Otherness of these distant works of art that I admired so much (such as Malevich's own *Black Square*) became interchangeable with the blackness, the Otherness, of the Aboriginal. I grew up, like Gordon Bennett, in Queensland. When I was growing up, my family and school friends told me all kinds of stories about Aboriginal people. I was frightened of them. The only person I met that was identified as Aboriginal was a boy at school, who was called 'Boong'. Another boy, who had been identified as Asiatic, was called 'Nip'. 'Boong' didn't last long at school, as our teacher hit him a lot with his cane. The last time I saw him, 'Boong' was standing on the traffic island of a busy intersection in the Brisbane suburb of Oxley. He was carrying a bucket of water, and I have always wondered what that bucket was for as we drove away.

So it was that Gordon Bennett's *Contemplation* struck my lived experience of racism in Australia, struck all those feelings of fear, remorse and concern that were a part of my life in Queensland. And here I think lies the cleverness that is built into *Contemplation*. For I would never have been so affected by the image if it were not for my own racism. If I had not thought of Gordon Bennett's Aboriginality as significant, *Contemplation* may have had no significance. I have been trying to

look at it as if it were by someone else, but this brings its own problems. Say, for instance, *Contemplation* were by Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst; it would have a whole other raft of meanings, and these are as much to do with their own constructed identities. These are the kinds of interpretive problems that face me when I look at your *Interiors*, John Citizen, because your canvases strike me as echoing the racial politics of Gordon Bennett. In *Interior (White Rug)*, 11 August 2006, the couches and table of this Interior are white, like the rug upon which the composition formally rests. Should I read this whiteness after my own whiteness? Should I read them after my own red Ikea rugs, that I walk upon every day? The trap here is to read racial politics into a work that, in becoming John Citizen, you may have attempted to erase from your work.

Other Australian painters of suburbia, such as Howard Arkley and Joanna Lamb, are not condemned by this association with race. They are allowed be artists without the explicitness of politics, as their images recall the ambivalences of Pop Art (Arkley) and the commercial world of graphic illustration (Lamb). I am not tempted to think of their colours in terms of white and black. Yet there is another difference here, John Citizen: as you take us inside the home, Arkley and Lamb remain outside, at its door. There is no sky in the *Interiors*, which are instead completely constructed spaces, their illusion as much a simulation as Ikea itself. Arkley and Lamb can anchor the strangeness of Australian suburbia to something beyond itself, to the sky above, but you plunge us into the totally strange. For today's picturesque there is no outside. While landscapes remain contested by competing interests and claims, the interior of a home is a private and hallucinatory domain.

But I wanted to ask you about contemporary art. Because John Citizen, unlike the Gordon Bennett that I know, seems to be making art that could be mistaken for what Kuspit calls 'postart'. These *Interiors* are certainly post-conceptual and post-pop, in that they regress into their own place as art (they illustrate a concept), and in bringing low culture (design and Ikea catalogues) into high art (thus being pop). This is why, John Citizen, when I see this barely repressed content in your work, I also think of Jimmie Durham's *Still Life with Stone and Car*. Because Jimmie Durham is also making identifiably contemporary art, albeit of a spectacular kind. He too is playing a double-coded game with the genre of contemporary art. *Still Life with Stone and Car* riffs upon the representations of nature and civilisation, material and form that have always turned up in his work. Yet Durham's work is also very different, in the scale and expense of its materials, and in the way that these materials are made to perform a certain ambivalence.

I hope that you do not mind if I compare Jimmie Durham's series of crushed vehicles to your *Interiors*. I do so, firstly, because I really like both of these works, and because they remind me of each other. Secondly, and on reflection, I think that these works all have something to say about contemporary art, or the genre(s) of contemporary art that have emerged within the art world. While *Still Life with Stone and Car* plays with the genre of spectacular contemporary art, your *Interiors* reflect the place of contemporary art in a society of affluence and leisure. The *Interiors* are decorative, removed from the world in a privatised and artificial domain of their own. In this, they are also ambivalent, existing in spite of the world's own concerns about art and its place. Are these common themes that you share with Jimmie Durham? My anxiety is that I am only discovering these commonalities because I look at your work, as I do at Jimmie Durham's, closer than other works, because you and he earned my respect with hard-hitting, deconstructive works before these contemporary, post-postmodern works. This is why I am writing to you both, to try and figure out whether these strategies of spectacle and ambivalence are anything but playing another art game, or whether there is something more there that has aroused my curiosity, driven me to look again, and made me laugh.

Dear Jimmie Durham and John Citizen,

It makes me wonder to see your works among other examples of contemporary art. In his book on contemporary art, Terry Smith finds the origins of the term “contemporary art” in the auction catalogues of the 1960s, which needed a way of distinguishing neo-primitive works from modern ones (2009: 120). Anything from Africa, made after traditional designs, was contemporary and not modern. As the 1960s turned into the 1970s, art that was not modern turned into postmodern art, as that which was not only alternative to modernism but critical of it. Thus the entanglement between postmodern and contemporary, as the one cultural dominant turned into the other, is due to the fact that the first was already entangled in the other.

Many successful artists of the postmodern era were educated at art school. Gordon Bennett was. So were you, Jimmie Durham. Today, the art world wants its artists to show their education without particular signs. It wants its artists to be clever, but not necessarily interested in the history of art. It wants to please the crowds, without being commercial. Navigating this new institutional art world, artists have become professionals. That you, Jimmie Durham and John Citizen, have chosen to make art in this contemporary world, working with the post-conceptual, post-pop style that is dominant today, makes me think differently about contemporary art. It makes me think about my cynicism toward it, and about what is at stake in contemporary art today. It is too easy to be, like Kuspit, dismissive of the commercialism and professionalism of contemporary art. Instead, it makes me look twice, to look again at the spectacles and the one-liners to see if there is anything more there. Because the spectacle of your stoned cars and planes, Jimmie Durham, and your suburban interiors, John Citizen, are one-liners with a catch. They make me laugh, but then ask of me what I am laughing at. They ask me to find the content of the joke.

But let's tell this historical story in a different way, and approach these works differently. One of the targets of postmodern critique was the primitivism of European artists. Appropriations of African masks and Oceanic motifs by European modernists were given short shrift by critics during the 1980s and 1990s. Since this impulse to deconstruct the primitive, however, there has been a kind of sea change. Take Marianna Torgovnick, who wrote one of the textbooks on modernist primitivism and its evils. Her book *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (1990) was one of the most influential exposes of modern art writers and figures of literature who relied on the primitive to simulate their mental journeys. Yet only a few years later Torgovnick was writing sympathetically of European modernists who had succumbed to the 'oceanic feeling' that Europeans had for non-European parts of the world. In her book *Primitive Passions: Men, Women and the Quest for Ecstasy* (1996), figures such as D.H. Lawrence and Dian Fossey, as well as the New Age appropriations of Native American cultures, are understood to be driven by compulsions toward something greater than themselves. Whatever their political mistakes, they are attracted to a shared experience of the world that binds humankind together. Torgovnick is not alone in leaving critiques of representation and race behind. Paul Gilroy, author of *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and a founder of race studies, has more recently penned a tract questioning the very terms of his analysis. *Against Race* (2000) suggests that analyses of race also tend to construct it, becoming the very object they set out to undermine. So too Rasheed Araeen, the founding editor of the postcolonial journal *Third Text*, has declared the postcolonial project a failure, and set out in search of a new avant-garde, a renewed modernism (2000: 8-10). All of these writers shift away from the kind of representational politics that distinguished their work within the era of postmodernism, and in the field of postcolonialism. Instead, they have become



contemporary, less conscious of the legacies of modernism and its art history, turning to a different set of problems.

Are your destroyed vehicles, Jimmie Durham, and your suburban interiors, John Citizen, also symptomatic of this sea change? Are the strategies you pursued before making these works, as you re-represented history and the Indigenous, no longer contemporary? I do not expect answers to these questions, for your works speak for your silence. Yet I am compelled to put your works into context, in order to understand them more, and to historicise its place after this idea of contemporary art. In the final pages of Terry Smith's book, he admits that that while he calls the historical period since the 1970s contemporary, he also defines this contemporary as ahistorical, as art that has been made in all times (2009: 250). Contemporary art is both historical and ahistorical, both a part of its times and out of it. Could this paradox inform both of your recent practices? The *Interiors* are certainly both historical, in that they reflect a particular bourgeoisie fantasy, and a bourgeoisie fantasy about art. This is also an ahistorical or, more precisely, *post*-historical fantasy, as in the depths of suburbia suffering has ended. I have seen how well your *Interiors* sell, John Citizen, I have seen the commercial success that lies in playing with the ironies of the contemporary and its false consciousness. This irony is a part of the condition of contemporary art, as this self-same bourgeoisie, the buyers of Aboriginal and other arts, also elect contemporary governments that revoke anti-discrimination legislation, send the army into remote communities and threaten to close down the communities that aren't economically viable.

If the *Interiors* brings the private worlds of art collecting and display into the light, *Still Life with Stone and Car* is on the other side of the contemporary art coin, its spectacle implicated in the media's language of sensation. This language is much louder than the particular languages of the postmodern, or the private ironies of collectable paintings. The destruction of a car is one more event in the general waste of life and materials within global consumption, the stone of *Still Life with Stone and Car* a reterritorialisation that returns the Ford Festiva to the state of inanimate matter from which it came. In this sense, *Still Life with Stone and Car* plays out the death drive of late capitalism, resonating with the nihilistic excesses of consumption. The ambivalence of the stone to this vehicle is the ambivalence of capital to its own material history. In America and Australia, levels of consumption are among the highest in the world - in my home city of Perth, Australia, the police have a policy of getting cars more than twenty years old off the road, but the average lifespan of a car is much, much less. The contemporary is a part of the way that we live. It is produced and reproduced by the police, the media and the art world alike, and it is to this reproduction that contemporary art defers. The post-representational, post-historical guises of contemporary art can only return to representation and history, as its works outline the greater systematisation of contemporaneity and its unfeeling ambivalence.

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