

Vulture and its ...

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Jimmie Durham was one of the feature artists of Hou Hanru's 2009 Lyon Biennale. Hanru had also invited me to contribute a catalogue essay for the exhibition and to speak at the symposium on the theme of the Diaspora. After the symposium I spent a day walking around the city marveling at the way Hanru had woven together a diverse range of artists to revisit the theme of the spectacle of everyday life. Jimmie had made two pieces. Inside the exhibition space there were a series of platforms with surveillance cameras on the protruding scaffolding. Meanwhile, just before the entrance of the main venue, perched on a long black steel pole, there is an aluminium vulture.

After passing on my congratulations, I added one little anecdote that could serve as a future amendment. The free guide description of Jimmie Durham's 'Look/Regarde', and 'Thinking of You 2009', describes the vulture as a 'bird of prey'. Further on, the function of vulture is described as 'playing the guardian of the established order more surely than all the cameras in the world'. Well let me tell you a story...

Over a thousand years ago, at one of those dinners after an Advisory Board meeting for the journal *Third Text*, we were going around the table describing our least favourite animal. When it came to my turn, I confessed to feeling repulsion at the sight of vultures in India. I had seen them hunched over the carcass of a dead cow, which was probably killed in a collision with a passing truck.

'There was this vulture, long beak, scruffy feathers, protruding pink neck, picking away, and when the carcass of the cow was light enough the vulture would lift it up and finish it all clean on top of a tree. YUK.' I said.

Jimmie was sitting next to me attentively.

'No, no, Nikos,' he said, 'Vultures are the most wonderful birds. First, they don't kill anything. And second, they are so much fun.'

To which I replied: 'Ok, I accept they are not birds of prey, but how do you have fun with a vulture?'

'Well, when I was a little boy my grandfather would take me up the mountain, and we would lay on the ground really still. When the vultures came down, he would whisper, now lay dead still. And just as they got to the tips of our toes, we would jump up, pull funny faces and laugh loudly.'

Indeed the image of a disappointed vulture hobbling away is something to laugh at, and of course, who would dare to play such a prank on an eagle? In the popular western hierarchy of things, the vulture is the scavenger rather than a hunter, more like a casual opportunist rather than a fierce protector. The United States of America would never revere an animal that draws on the ecology of the dead. But let us postulate that just as the eagle is the symbol of the idealized ego, the imperious self at its most vaunted moment of hubris, then the vulture is the unconscious of the empire, a murky symbol of our dependence on the dead.

In Guatemala, my friend Carlos Capelan introduced me to a group of young artists and I remember hearing a story about a performance by Regina Jose Galindo. She stripped herself naked and plucked all the feathers of a dead vulture. [1] The vulture is considered as a sacred creature in Tibet. After eating the dead, the vulture is supposed to carry the soul to heaven. Lin Li, a Chinese-Australian artist, participated in what she considered as a ritual of re-birth by placing her naked body on the stone where the dead were laid out. Upon her body portions of meat were offered to the vultures. She lay very still with the intensity of both the mourner and the corpse. [2]

I now suspect that the surveillance camera and the vulture are there in everything Jimmie makes as an artist. In 1988 he made a ceremonial Celtic pole, complete with two large rear-view mirrors and a 'savage' video camera fitted out with coke bottle lens. [3] For the 2005 Venice Biennale he constructed an energy system composed of found objects such as an old car tyre, beaten up electronic boards, fake busts, empty oil drums, mirrors and inter-connecting pipes to suggest how the past was coming up fast but without leaving any trace. [4]

In Northern Ireland Jimmie's pole could be read as a direct challenge to the British army's mechanisms of surveillance and repression, whereas the installation in the Venetian arsenal, while retracing the persistent resistance and rage against occupation and colonization, also evokes the underside of the culture of consumer arrogance. The spirit of this culture, that combines an indomitable military conquest, unbound engineering confidence and a necrophilous hunger for exotica, proceeds without the slightest ruffle over its own posterity. Such desire, which presumes an uninterrupted right to continuity, a life without entropy, is cast as the superego of an empire that is posed to hit the wall. Within this triumphal march towards progress, there is another tune, which as Jimmie's title suggests, assumes the form of a 'fuge or elegy'.

The mirror is the companion of the vulture. As repression and control tightens the ability to see what is catching up from the past, the need to see what is coming to you is a kind of attention, that Jimmie claims is deep in his consciousness

Coyote, who invented death and singing, was the spirit who gave me my name. As is often the case, he also gave me a gift. This is what he gave me, a name gift: that I would always see whatever was dead if it were within my field of vision. For more than 30 years I have been seeing every dead bird and animal everyday, wherever I am. So it became necessary to see if that was a usable gift or just a dirty trick that would drive me crazy. [5]

This attunement towards the presence of all things dead is a perspective that runs throughout Jimmie's oeuvre. It is in the pulse of his most vivid polemics, such as the essay in which he exposed the recurring elimination of the indigenous people in the defining narratives of the Americas. According to Jimmie, the absence of Indians reaches its cannibalistic climax

in the last great wave of Hollywood Westerns - Shane, High Noon et al - the hero and the settlers are all by themselves on the endless prairies. They cannot remember when they last had to kill 'Indians'. At some point late night by the campfire, presumably, the Lone Ranger ate Tonto. [6]

This attempt to find meaning, to pose metaphysical questions on the form of existence, to resist the code that renders the self into a kind of 'solid vacuum', also remains in his most poetic ventures into the European landscape. These forays, which

on the surface are continuous with the practice of using found objects as the material for sculpture, have also been motivated by an ongoing investigation into the principle of petrification. Again, according to Jimmie, all sorts of objects such as potatoes and pecorino as well as elements such as clouds can, under the right circumstances, petrify. [7]

During the 2004 Sydney Biennale, Jimmie installed a container under the stairs of the Museum of Contemporary Art. It was dramatically lit from above and it deliberately occupied a space that people normally walk over to get somewhere else. It was an interesting provocation on the status of the archive and the found object in art, for it recalled the domestic practice by which most people try to claim that space under their house as a storage well, and put all their old belongings, like an attic or pantry kind of space, where sometimes our secret histories are held.

Jimmie agreed:

I liked that space because it is a space and it's not supposed to be a space. It's supposed to be kind of space that is not there. You're not supposed to be looking at it, so I was immediately attracted to it as a potential place to pretend to be hiding something like that place itself pretends to be hiding, pretends not to exist. So I thought immediately of a box of everything. But especially a box of human things, man made things. I didn't care. I wanted them all to be from Sydney, and that was easy to do. I just went to this big auction house and got a lot of very very cheap things. Including a book that calls itself *One Thousand Beautiful Things*. But my idea was to fill a box full of things as a sculpture. As an intricate internal sculpture. Instead of a sculpture that projects itself out to the world, a sculpture that tries to pull you into it or something and pull itself in together. So the more internal it is, the more complex it is. Instead of complexity showing itself on the outside it works on the inside. I like working with existing objects sometimes in a certain kind of way. I did a project for Trondheim in Norway for its 1,000 anniversary. And with the help of some students I gathered 1,000 objects from around Trondheim and each one had a year painted on it. They began to talk to their years that were painted on them and they began to talk to each other, all these objects. And I was surprised and pleased. So I saw that if you put a bunch of things in a box they start talking to each other. [8]

The model for this installation was 'the museum itself. I was imagining my box was like a museum that was being punished for not being good enough and would just sit under the stairs. The museum in a museum.' Once again, the mirror holds a prominent position in this installation, performing a double function, both protecting and revealing:

They keep evil away for one thing. There's a beautiful dance that you do with a mirror because you're dancing so intensely some evil spirit could come in and take over. But when you have a mirror and you're dancing with this mirror the spirit can't come in. You have a guardian. But I like this constant reminder to people that you are part of something. I'm doing a piece, another piece in Norway, up in Sami country, it's not titled with seven directions but it has a plaque that explains the seven directions, up, down, east, west, south, north and inside. So there is a mirror close by it so that you see that you are the inside, and the inside is inside you. I like the Aztec Quetzacoatl. He reigns for 52 years as a beautiful prince and then his very ugly brother comes up from Hell and takes him out to a party and gets him drunk. The next morning, he's all

bedraggled. He looks like his brother, his brother then whips out an obsidian mirror and holds it up in front of Quetzacoatl and says, 'See what you look like'. At that moment Quetzacoatl goes to Hell and his brother reigns for 52 years. But there's also a marvellous thing that the prisoners do. They all have little hand mirrors so they can pull them outside the bars of their cell to see what's going on in the rest of the world, namely the rest of the prison, that's their world.

In an optimistic start to his essay on Jimmie's participation in Sydney, Mick Taussig recalls the claim that if you cut across perfection you release something holy. By the leaping powers of analogy, he then proposed that by rearranging reality art some of that too. Indeed, there is no art without some form of violence, and the meaning that lurks in banal objects can be equal to any abstraction. This tension was certainly evident in Jimmie's placement of a large rock on the roof of a red car by the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House. Upon this rock Jimmie painted a kind of happy-sad face. In a conversation he said,

'I wanted the expression to be placid and... not show any concern with whether or not it had crushed a car. I felt quite sorry for the car. Especially when I sat down in it for a moment. I felt quite sorry for it.'

'So you sat in the car before and then you said, "I'm sorry this is about to befall you"?'

'Yeah.'

'Did it say, "It's okay, Jimmie, I'm ready"?''

'I felt so, yeah.'

When the rock came down it was lowered with a delicate precision. The car was not simply smashed. The slow release of the weight of the rock on its roof allowed it to sigh and creak. Windows and tyres popped before the metal buckled into total submission. Jimmie said,

I knew always that I wouldn't drop it. But somehow the idea got communicated that I would drop it. But my reason for not thinking to drop it is that I had a very exact way that I wanted the stone to be there. And when you drop something you don't get precision you get a haphazard effect. That in itself can be quite nice. I do a lot of that, I call them lithographs. I put a piece of paper on the ground and throw a rock at it. That makes a lithograph. And then there's a beautiful haphazard, a beautiful chance happening. So I can do an edition of 10 lithographs or 10 copies of a lithograph and each one will be completely different. But I needed this stone to sit in an exact place in the car. So I knew I couldn't drop it.

Mick Taussig is also an artist. Even before the performance was held, he pointed out that stones are also used for the initiation of boys. They were used for knocking out the front teeth of boys as they sat on the shoulders of men. The boy's blood would then flow down onto his shoulders, and an older man would give the boy his name. This echo between the use of rocks assured Jimmie that he was on the right track.

'When you sat in the car,' Mick asked, 'were you talking to a boy about to become a man?'

‘Now that’s a thought. Yes, I suppose I was. Now it’s eternal in a certain way. As a car it’s already a used car, it had five more years of life and then the junk heap and a slow rot. But I’ve saved its life. Now it’s going to be art forever.’

An aluminium vulture perched on a steel pole called ‘Thinking of You’ and the destiny of the car are interlinked in a curious way. Originally, the sculpture of the vulture was intended as a piece of public art in a traffic roundabout. Jimmie was, as he notes interested in an invitation by the City of Brussels to make a work that ‘would not be that interesting.’ [9] Artists were required to make a work that should be there, but not so visible that it would distract drivers and cause more accidents. Jimmie’s response was rejected. Can you imagine if the city agreed and allowed the vulture to sit patiently, wondering, ‘Hmm, what’s for dinner?’

Vultures, mirrors and rocks tell us a great deal about the complex ecological and radial historical consciousness that pervades Jimmie’s aesthetic practice. Energy and meaning are found in both the reuse of objects that hang on the edges of disappearance and the violent act of defacing. Maybe this is Jimmie’s way of wrestling with the gift given to him by Coyote. He not only sees all the dead things that are in his field of vision, but symbolically, if not literally, he picks them up, and waits until he find its rendezvous with history. He is a storyteller who, as John Berger noted, accepts his duty as death’s secretary:

What separates us from the characters about whom we write is not knowledge, either objective or subjective, but their experience of time in the story we are telling. This separation allows us, the storytellers, the power of knowing the whole. Yet, equally, this separation renders us powerless: we cannot control our characters, after the narration has begun. We are obliged to follow them, and this following is through and across the time, which they are living and which we oversee. The time, and therefore the story, belongs to them. Yet the meaning of the story, what makes it worthy of being told, is what we can see and what inspires us because we are beyond its time. Those who read or listen to our stories see everything as through a lens. This lens is the secret of narration, and it is ground anew in every story, ground between the temporal and the timeless. If we storytellers are Death’s Secretaries, we are so because, in our brief mortal lives, we are grinders of these lenses. [10]

I once arranged a lunch in Geneva so that John and Jimmie could meet each other. After the meal, John told me that he could feel that he was in the presence of a legend. I take this to mean that Jimmie’s authority as a man comes from his living connection to history. My Mexican friend, Cuautemoc Medina, said the same thing when we pondered the paucity of wisdom in the art world. Jimmie would of course turn the mirror the other way:

Back home we have old people who have the most amazing power - it shines and vibrates, and I think it comes from their goodness and generosity of spirit. They are smart, miss nothing, and they are strong. But what one sees is just goodness. I’d like to achieve that. When it comes time to die. I’d like to say to shit, ‘Ha, ha shit, I won!’ [11]

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Endnotes

¹ Galinda, Regina José. "Zopilote, Ave Nacional", Guatemala, 2005.

² Li, Lin. "Soul Flight", in *Voiceovers*, curated by Victoria Lynn (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1999).

³ Lippard, Lucy. 'Postmodernist "Savage", Native American Artist', *Art in America*, Feb (1993): 124.

⁴ Durham, Jimmie. *Something, (Perhaps a Fuge or an Elegy)*, (Venice: Venice Biennale, 2005).

⁵ In Lippard, 'Postmodernist "Savage", Native American Artist'.

⁶ Durham, Jimmie. 'Cowboys and ...', *Third Text* 12 (1990): 11.

⁷ Durham, Jimmie. 'Talks about his survey this month at the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris ARC', *Artforum*, Jan (2009).

⁸ 'Conversation between Nikos Papastergiadis, Maria-Theresa Alves and Jimmie Durham' in *A Thousand Beautiful Things*, Sydney, 2004.

⁹ Durham, 'Talks about his survey this month at the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris ARC'.

¹⁰ Berger, John. *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos*. (London: Writers and Readers, 1984): 30-31.

¹¹ In Lippard, 'Postmodernist "Savage", Native American Artist'.