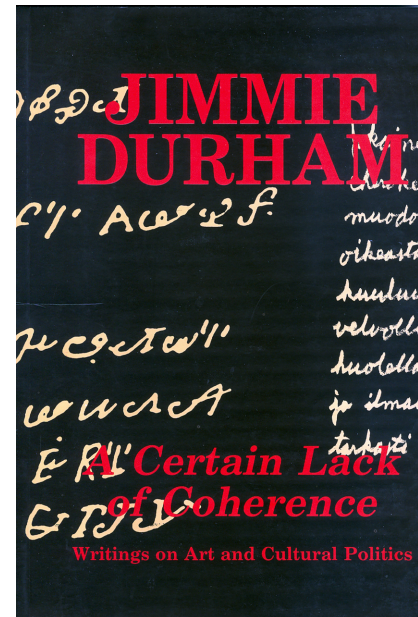


The third of our republichings of a selection of Jimmie Durham's writings from *A Certain Lack of Coherence: Writings on Art and Cultural Politics* (1993, see www.thirdtext.org/durham-coherence), "... very much like the Wild Irish": Notes on a Process which has no end in sight was originally published as a broadsheet by the Orchard Gallery, Derry, when Durham was invited to work with the Gallery on a project there in 1988. He muses on the connection between the histories of colonisation in Ireland and North America ('Reading Irish history while in Mexico I was shocked by the long duration and viciousness of the English oppression of Ireland...'). It also mentions Durham's continuing interest in trees and wood, that was ongoing at the time of his death in 2021 with the LABINAC design collective he had initiated with the artist Maria Thereza Alves and other European and indigenous makers (www.labinac.com). In the end, the reality of experiencing Northern Ireland in 1988, with its surveillance cameras and British military presence, ten years prior to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, led the artist to produce a multimedia work, part-performance, part-sculpture and part-interactive installation, *Four Scenes for the British Army*, that he probably could not have foreseen or planned beforehand. The bold emphases were added by the artist for the book and were not in the original broadsheet.



"... very much like the Wild Irish" *

Notes on a Process which has no end in sight

WEST

As an authorised savage it is my custom and my job to attack; so when I was invited to do a work at the Orchard Gallery in Derry, Ireland, that was my first thought. I made a list of what I knew about Irish Americans: the various presidents who had gone out of their way to jack us around – Reagan, Kennedy, Jackson; of the atrocities committed against us by the Irish immigrants we call 'crackers'; and of the more subtle atrocities committed today by Irish

* From a letter by an early English visitor to the Cherokee nation, describing the houses of the Cherokees

priests on our reservations, who make our beautiful free young girls dress in black and act more repressed and European than any European girl could hope to aspire to. My thoughts went from there to Hollywood's classic stereotype of the wise and kindly Irish priest, starring Pat O'Brien, Spencer Tracy and Timothy Fitzgerald; and thence on to the murderous Cardinal Cooke of New York. I gathered these images like stones I would throw at those who least expected an Indian attack, at a bunch of whites who assumed so arrogantly a history of oppression similar to mine. BUT THEN, I remembered when I was an activist during the 1970s and the meetings with various political organisations from Ireland.

SOUTH

Declan McGonagle at the Orchard Gallery said that perhaps I would find parallels between my people and his.

At my place of exile in southern Mexico I began to read about Irish history. My immediate thought was to find a way of presenting a little-known phenomenon: the Scots-Irish ruling class among my people, the Cherokees, and among our neighbours, the Creek Indians. Among us Cherokees, some of the great families are named Ridge, Vann, Starr and Ross. John Ross, our principle chief from the 1820s through the 1860s, fought bravely and continuously against the US invasion of our territory. But he, and the other Scots-Irish Cherokees, remodelled our society and system of government to make it more like that of the US, even including, for themselves, large plantations worked by African slaves. BUT THEN, all this seemed more of a historical curiosity than a potentially effective operant for an artwork.

I thought of the parallels between our Red Stick Warrior Society and the Red Branch of Irish history. So I thought of the facts about wood and trees. I had just read that an English king had destroyed the forests of Ireland, just as our own forests had been destroyed. Old Irish literature is filled with references to trees and to wooden things. Once an Irish warrior sought the help of the woman of the tree – a benign yet potentially dangerous woman, much like our Grandmother Spider. I read about Yew trees, and found a picture of a sacred old Yew in County Fermanagh that was big enough, and old enough, to be a proper dwelling for an Earth Mother.

It seemed feasible that I could put something together for an artwork about trees and wood: something with a political edge, and a long historical, and pre-historical frame.

EAST

I was in London to attack the English in an art gallery. A friend gave me modern essays and books about Ireland. And as I read **I began to suspect that the Irish might, in fact,**

be like us – too set up by history; that the combination of our grief, pride, and sentimentality with the world's stereotypes of us might be too heavy a burden these days.

I talked to Declan on the phone again. He said it would be good if I could do something that addressed public language. I said in that case I want to construct an actual billboard. I wanted to make a savage billboard of tree trunks and old timbers, ropes and garbage; a memorial billboard, a reclamation billboard, an anti-billboard that calls attention to itself and its materials instead of being an invisible framework for a message unconnected to itself. I would want it to be a direct challenge to billboard-ism.

NORTH

BUT THEN, something began to come together in my consciousness. Reading Irish history while in Mexico I was shocked by the long duration and viciousness of the English oppression of Ireland; but I was equally shocked by the dehumanisation set up by English linguistic terminology. Both the massacres and their justification, and then the specific vocabulary used against us by the English, and by the English who called themselves 'Americans', had been tried and proved on Ireland.

I often wondered why the history of the English in the Americas was so different from that of either the Spanish or the Portuguese. The English fought a war of total extermination against us, with a virulent xenophobia, a disgust at the idea of inter-marriage, and a mind-boggling self-righteousness that fuelled an endless discourse. It is in large part simply because the English had accustomed themselves to such monstrosity, and had founded their new economic culture upon it, through their experience with Ireland.

(We have returned to the West.) It is this cultural agenda and narrative that became England's legacy to the US, that gave the US its vision and cultural means to become a more monstrous and self-righteous imperial top dog than England had ever been.

DOWN

In other words, there is something going on here. There is not history as past events. There are not 'marginal' peoples. Here is something more central to the agenda and cultural apparatus of, not really a 'dominant culture', but a machine-like ideological structure that is cutting down and swallowing everything.

So I must ask about the origins of all this: which English, why and how did it all start? The first invasion of Ireland began only about one hundred years after the Normans conquered England. They were in complete control, so the Sassenach armies worked on behalf of Norman lords. Economic factors do not seem to be exclusively determinate.

A dangerously subtle ideological apparatus is in effect, one that can make a normal Englishman become a Black and Tan in the service of some rich guys from Normandy, or make a poor Irish immigrant into a violently racist fool in Boston in the service of Anglo-Americans.

UP

It's still in England! It's still in London! Against the Irish. I had only to read the papers, or to listen to people talk. Here is something cultural that can be, that must be, challenged culturally.

BUT THEN, is there any way my savage billboard could attempt to be a part of that challenge, or must I scrap the whole idea and start on a new track?

INSIDE

WELL THEN, what have I got so far? About wood and trees: I've distilled an idea about the usage of material that can take a practical shape as material. About Cherokee and Irish history: I've abstracted what seems to be an important operating principle that may *not* be better fought for being abstracted. I'm a fairly smart guy, so it's easy to sit around thinking up ideas and plans.

But I've not arrived in Ireland, maybe my ideas do not suit the needs of anyone there. It is a little absurd to be the lone artist, riding into town to make some object or processional construct for the locals, and then to ride out. So my proposal is that whatever I do in Ireland, this document will be an integral part of it: first, as a letter of introduction. I want to get people's reactions and suggestions, and active co-operation.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

BUT THEN, I arrived in Ireland, at Knock airport because it was close to Strokestown where I spent two days in the country. Now, here I am in Derry, but it seems necessary to give you a brief report on my comfortable odyssey so far, with appropriate philosophical asides, and moral observations.

My first day in Strokestown, I went out into a small forest and picked two kinds of mushrooms and proudly brought them back to the house as my gift for the family's hospitality. The family was afraid of my mushrooms. One guy said he knew for certain that they were poisonous, deadly. I tried to reason courteously with them as I made mushroom soup. No one would try the soup, no matter how much I smacked my lips, made silly noises

and went on about how delicious Irish mushrooms were; even though I had no qualms about sampling *their* gift of Irish whisky. According to my own culture, I had been seriously refused by the refusal of my gift. Then, secretly and viciously (in my own defence) I thought, ‘What else about your own land do you idiots not know?’

On my walk through the woods I had found some yew which had been cut. I recognised it right away from the words I had read about it. I have two pieces which I carry around, carving them at odd moments.

When I got to Dublin a man gave me a piece of bog oak, which I’d never heard of. He said that in Ireland every month had a tree. October was the month of hazel trees, and that is why hazelnuts are given at Hallowe’en. (But in Dublin peanuts were more common at Hallowe’en now; because they are easier to crack? It seems degenerate.)

I began to ponder the situation – very much like our own. There is a fierce love of the land, which becomes removed from the actual land and becomes an abstraction, almost a sentimentalisation of the land. Land as politics, as an idea, as an ideology. It seems to me to be a phenomenon that plays into the hands of anyone (any structure) that has an interest in our alienation.

The man with the wood took me to a pub with two other guys. The conversation was about either the *importance* of history and tradition or about the *burden*, according to who was talking. I agreed with both sides. I came back once again to an idea that has been in my mind more and more – the necessity for a dynamic complexity, a refusal of simple answers just when such answers seem most desirable. How is it possible to maintain and respect, to never forget one moment, with the obvious purpose of allowing us to live our lives as dynamically as possible with as much importance as possible? To have a base for the purpose of being in the world, instead of for the purpose of enclosure – either reservations or defence.

As I flew from Dublin to Derry, though, I drifted back to trees, because of the countryside. Why had the government in Dublin not done a reforestation? A celebration of yew trees, beech, oak, cedar, pine and hazel. BUT THEN, as I said, here I am in Derry, welcomed by two trucks full of British soldiers. My idea about billboards turned out to be pretty dumb; Ireland doesn’t have such a complete attack of giant billboards as has the US.

My ideas about English/Irish history being the basis for US imperialism seems to remain a little too abstract outside of this text (even though the text remains a part of the work).

My current plan comes from having walked around Derry looking at the video cameras watching me, and talking with people. It must be much more centred around Derry as Derry, and my being here. So it needs to be more complex, more ambiguous, and more in solidarity with the people I’ve been singing with in the pub.

THE PROJECT

First, a text, which will be used publicly, like a broadsheet. Its purpose is to explain the idea of the project and to solicit participation. Second, a sculpture in a public place. The sculpture will be made of wood, found objects, photos, and a small earth-work, along with the text and 'evidence' submitted by the public. Third, a book which will contain a photo record, the text and the 'evidence'. The sculpture will be very vaguely in the form of both a Celtic cross and a Cherokee ceremonial pole. A log or tree trunk stands upright with a handmade camera at the top. Two large rear-view-mirrors (like those on the side of lorries) are attached as arms. In the centre of the pole are four photos. Behind the pole is a small earth-work pretending to be an archaeological 'dig', with various strata of objects. In front of the pole will be an area where **the public will be invited to submit 'evidence' in any form (objects, words, photos, etc) about any subject or situation.** Close by will be a copy of the text. The final book will also be considered as 'evidence'.

1988



Jimmie Durham, right, working on *Four Scenes for the British Army* for the Orchard Gallery, Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1988, photo by Rory Poland, courtesy of Kurimanzutto