

Hard to be at Home

I once stayed at the home of a curator, D__ S__, with whom I was working on an exhibition. When showing me his coffee maker, he explained there was an element of risk. He pointed out coffee stains on every wall. His last artist guest had accidentally let the pot of coffee explode. I think he told me not to say anything, but the artist who did it was Jimmie Durham. I allow myself to say so because I feel so close to him now, even though at the time the name Jimmie Durham didn't mean anything to me. I don't know him personally. I don't even know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, if he was the one who really blew up the pot. D__ S__ gave me a book, published on the occasion of a Jimmie Durham exhibition he organized, called *Between the Furniture and the Building (Between a Rock and a Hard Place)* (Oktagon, 1999)¹. Although I don't have the space here to substantiate it, it seems I have been on this guy's trail for some time without even knowing it. That may be a stretch, but not as much of a stretch as when white Americans claim to be one-sixteenth Cherokee. Seriously, I think I am at least one-sixteenth Jimmie Durham.

Durham's *Between the Furniture and the Building* is prefaced with a brief 'letter' of introduction, somewhere between an apology and an invitation. Durham admits procrastinating, blaming it on how much he loved just thinking about this book, and starting would mean finishing, and he doesn't want to finish. Reading his writing is a lot like listening since it hints it's all extemporaneous. If one should feel the need to corral the thoughts that scurry off each page, one can just refer back to the title. Remember that to be between a rock and a hard place means being in the position of having to choose from two unsatisfactory options. Each unexpected change of subject carries the promise of an overlooked option.

Chapter 1 starts from scratch, with two etymological dictionaries, one German, one English. While hosting a dialogue between the two languages, it occurs to Durham that, 'Years of loose living and big spending have made English somewhat more engagingly lackadaisical [than German].' In English, *poet* means *builder*, while the German equivalent, *Dichter*, means *sayer*. This comes as a surprise because to me,

German sentences seem far more built and brick-like than English, which can trickle out of its sayer all liquified and directionless, and still make sense. Even the sloppiest, or downright incorrect sentence can sound vaguely poetic, i.e., 'I would have to ask the questioner; I haven't had a chance to ask the questioners the question they've been questioning.'² This is not to say that English can't build – and subsequently run into – walls: 'I mean there needs to be a wholesale effort against racial profiling, which is illiterate children.'³

In English, carpenter means 'maker of cars' (chariots) and the German equivalent, Zimmerman, translates to 'Maker of rooms.' This strikes Durham as beautiful as it suggests it's not walls, but space that's being built. He tells us the Cherokee word for carpenter is 'fixer,' but before he can compare and contrast he gets self-conscious: 'Yes, yes, I know that it is a needless interruption to bring in this outsider when two old friendly enemies, German and English, are sitting comfortably discussing their chairs; perhaps I must now confess that interruption of the official line is not only my main motive for writing (even if the 'official line' is one of my own devising), but it is also my sole possibility for survival. I'm trying to write an anti-suicide note.'

There are more apologies for referencing oppressed minorities. He's caught slack for that before and promises not to do it anymore. His promise isn't kept.⁴ But getting back to the furniture. A helpful tip is offered for anyone suffering from hemorrhoids or difficult bowel movements. In the WC ('water closet,' really a water chair), you should put a 20cms. high box under your feet so that your body is closer to a squatting position, which is the appropriate position for a BM. Going even further, an etymological investigation reveals that chairs don't even exist. They're derived from cathedrals or 'seats' of power, and even 'sitting' never meant what you think; it just means 'staying'. When I read that chairs don't exist I was 'sitting' in the waiting room of a doctor's office where I counted 30 of them, all empty except mine. The HMO TV Channel was announcing that the

1 Incidentally, the book does not withhold the identity of D__ S__, who shows up now and again.

2 George W. Bush, January 8, 2002

3 George W. Bush, October 11, 2000

4 By the way, from 1975 to 1980, Durham was a member of AIM, the American Indian Movement. Notice the word Indian is preferred, so it's not called the Native American Movement, which is good because NAM would be an unfortunate acronym.

average American consumes 30 pounds of cheese a year, making it likely that even if the average American assumed a more natural pose at the toilet, his or her problems would remain unsolved.

'We've all read that books should raise questions.' So, he asks: Whatever happened to Saroya Pahlevi, who was married to the son of the Shah of Iran, who supposedly hired Tony Shafrazi as an art advisor?⁵ It's not clear why Durham wants to know, he just wants to, and asks if you could write to him, care of his publisher, if you know anything. Then he openly regrets mentioning Shafrazi and Wilson. They might get mad like L__ B__ once did, causing him to go around badmouthing Jimmie Durham. He figures he should stop giving artists publicity and concludes that mentioning artists by name must cease. The proper nouns start to pop up later, regardless. There's something almost aggressive about naming names, and then at the very same time it seems genuine, earnest, charmingly direct. The problem seems to stem from some unspoken agreement that every other artist is automatically a colleague. It was D__ S__ who told him something along these lines. Artists must therefore be handled only with the kid gloves of professionalism – no being too mean, too sweet, too specific, too personal. Durham reflects on the value of such an agreement while continuing to violate it. I think this violation says a lot about the status and potential of the anecdote.

Durham used to think birds were just birds until he saw a parrot entertaining itself in a restaurant in Mexico. 'I could see that he was an intelligent something.' Now he complains parrots are being taught to be 'stupid capitalists' – given cookies in exchange for saying certain words. Durham intended to talk about how odd it is to come from a people we are known to have worn feathers, but realizes he has nothing to say on the matter after all. 'Dur' means hard and 'Ham' means home, which he translates as 'hard to be at home.'

He tells the story of a British sculptor named Fairplay (I guess that means 'Fair Play') who came to New York in the '80s to carve a stone for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. After meeting

with one Brazilian artist, one Cuban artist, and one Cherokee from the terrorist organization AIM (Durham), the visiting British sculptor ended up carving a perfect portrait of Leonard Peltier on the Cathedral.⁶

On the lighter side, maybe, there's a recipe for 'quick-and-easy' biscuits which may, in fact, be the second dose of some previously launched cynicism regarding Richard Serra: prepare the biscuits in an iron pan – 'Cor-Ten steel is the best.' Next comes a recipe for gravy, then lye. Then some more art recipes involving rocks, after which Rosalind Krauss makes an appearance, saying, in essence, that art big in size proves the artist is committed, serious. This is curiously followed by a 'Yeah, really!', which manages to read as both sarcastic and celebratory. Oh and Durham writes poetry too. He wants to close his book with two poems but can't find the good one, 'so you get to read only the horrible one, sorry.' It dates back to 1968 and is not so horrible, and, clearly, he's not sorry.

5 See Anthony Haden-Guest's *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (Grove, 1998) for a brief account of Shafrazi's Middle East art adventure.

6 Leonard Peltier was convicted of killing two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 1975. He is serving two life sentences for a crime many people believe he did not commit.