Jimmie Durham on Becoming Authentic
ON BECOMING AUTHENTIC: INTERVIEW WITH JIMMIE DURHAM

Nikos Papastergiadis & Laura Turney

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Preface

Jimmie Durham is an artist and activist of Cherokee descent. In this interview he covers a wide range of issues: the contradictory relationship between environmentalist groups and indigenous movements for land rights; political and cultural relations with black Americans and Africans; art, story-telling and music. But the underlying theme is his own search for an authenticity which has been denied him and people like him by a world whose image of American Indians has been indelibly shaped by Hollywood. This search has taken him to the heart of the European Union in Brussels. It has also made him increasingly wary of the conventions of contemporary identity politics.

There can be little doubt at the end of the twentieth century that the struggles of the aboriginal peoples whose societies were crushed by European settlers are making a growing impact on global consciousness. Jimmie Durham’s extraordinary reflections on his own life give some indication of why this may be so. His is a truly cosmopolitan intellect, formed by disgust with the old regime of our day and by a hope born of resistance. This "noble savage" is a true successor to his inventor, Rousseau.

"On becoming authentic" is the latest pamphlet in which the text originated as speech, as conversation. The resulting hybrid offers a glimpse of living thought and with it a greater sense of our shared humanity than the prepared scripts of scholars normally permit to show. This too is one of the reasons for commissioning the present interview for the Prickly Pear series.

The Editors

Introduction

Born in 1940, Jimmie Durham is an internationally acclaimed artist, writer and poet of Cherokee descent. Durham spent a number of years in the 1970s on the Central Council of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and was its chief fund-raiser. He also helped set up, through fund-raising and the co-ordination of facilities, the women’s organisation of AIM, Women of All Red Nations (WARN). He took a leading role, as founding director, of the International Indian Treaty Council at the United Nations (IITC). The IITC was AIM’s diplomatic channel; the first indigenous organisation to be recognised as a non-governmental consultative group by the United Nations. The IITC achieved a presence within the United Nations for all indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere.

In 1977, Durham co-ordinated the first hemispheric delegation of 98 native representatives to the Palace of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland where they made presentations before a subcommission of the United Nations commission on human rights. The presentation led to the creation of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations and the formulation of the "Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" which has been incorporated into international law.

Durham left AIM in 1979. He has also co-edited Treaty Council News and in 1982 he became the Director of the Foundation for the Community of Artists, a New York artists advocacy group where he helped edit the newspaper Art and Artists. In 1983, his book of poems, Columbus Day was published and since then he has exhibited his work internationally and published in numerous journals. 1993 saw the publication of A Certain Lack of Coherence, an anthology of writings by Durham that date from 1974 to the early 1990s. In 1995, Phaidon Press, as part of their series of contemporary artists books, presented a

This interview starts from our aim to locate and combine Jemima’s work (in the art world and in politics) with a critique of environmentalism. It is important to look at how environmentalism, as an ethic, has been portrayed and used by eco-groups in their relations with native people in North America, how their perception of environmentalism has been formulated to question and judge the identity and “authenticity” of indigenous peoples and in doing so to create colonial-style hierarchies. A natural assumption would appear to be that indigenous peoples and environmentalists should form natural alliances, thus, to find evidence of conflict which challenges basic stereotypes of both groups needs further analysis. This interview explores how in the art world, the green movement or international solidarity – hierarchies are, in fact, mobilised once again.

Jemima Durham’s work addresses both the political and cultural forces in the construction of identity and the problems with situating oneself in a sympathetic context. It also illustrates how the tensions between indigenous rights and environmental politics are paralleled by the role of cultural difference in contemporary art in the face of modernism’s crisis. Durham situates herself uncomfortably between a specific community and an abstract audience. Whether it is in terms of his advocacy of indigenous rights within a Marxist paradigm, or the identification of artistic strategies in relation to the “new intermesticism”, Durham is always addressing the legacy of ethnic ITE as well as considering the widest possible alliances for the oppressed. His mode of thinking is compositive and inclusive, turning things inside out, starting from etymology and working towards a theory, ricocheting from point to point but also always looking for a position from which the observer can become witness. By constantly implicating himself in the politics of art, and vice-versa, his arguments gain an extra twist, one that does not so much remove the barb from his judgement, but shows that it cuts both ways.

Nikos Papastergiadis
Laura Turney

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On Becoming Authentic: 

Interview with 
Jimmie Durham
The following interview with Nikos (NP) and Laura (LT) pose questions to Jimmie (JD) with one interjection from his wife, Maria Theresa (MT).

NP: Can you talk about the difficulties in forging alliances with green movements that were the result of conflicting interpretations of guardianship of the land and purity of nature?

JD: Let's begin with a specific example, the Tellico Dam. The environmental groups were never on our side yet they expected us to be on their side from the very beginning. Environmentalists weren't generally willing to be seen on the same side with us because it politicised what they thought needed to be not politicised. For them it was strictly an environmental issue and if you brought in indigenous rights it became politicised. That's always been their status from the Environmental Defense Fund, Sierra Club, all the big groups down to the little groups. A lot of the little groups are actively against Indians because we're just other humans polluting what should be pristine land.

I always feel that in Mexico I regained some of the wisdom of my childhood. I grew up in the woods and it was dangerous. There were five kinds of poisonous snakes. There were bugs that could kill you, spiders that would kill you; all sorts of things that would bite you or scratch you or make you sick if you breathed too close to this tree and so on. It made us careful, it made us move carefully. It wasn't so severe in Mexico but it introduced this element back in my life and suddenly I felt that I was back in the world for the first time since my childhood. There were certainly environmental workers who were not prepared to live in such close proximity to scorpions or black widow spiders; they didn't want the wilderness quite so wild, or quite so close to them.

LT: With the Tellico Dam, the point of contention was this tiny fish, the Snail Darter. Could you tell us how certain issues were prioritised during this controversy?

JD: It was presumed that we, as Indians, would support the fish; which we didn't. We combined the two issues, our land rights and this fish, but the environmentalists did not. They never said - Cherokee land rights and this fish or even - this fish and Cherokee land rights. This is now a famous case because the New Gingriches of the world still like to use the Snail Darter as a sign of the stupidity of the environmental movement. The idea of saving one little fish is seemed very stupid to them so it's kind of buckfired on the environmentalists just because of the viciousness of the US. I don't want to say that they should have taken up our side so they wouldn't have been made fun of, but still, if they had said, this is the centre of the Cherokee nation, then the anti-environmentalists would also have to admit to ridiculing an old Indian burial ground and subsequently indigenous land rights.

NP: Can you say a little more about that inability to develop a model of thinking, by say the Green movement, of what might be called a combinatorial approach, a sort of understanding of how a culture co-exists with land? When they prioritise land over people, rather than seeing a conjunction between the two, then this has already created a tension.

JD: I think for us in the US, we will always have a fight to develop our communities beyond a subsistence level. It was so bad in the forties and early fifties in Oklahoma, the Cherokees were in very bad shape because we'd been
through the bad stetts and the Government came in and
said - we are the agricultural experts, you can use this very
bad rocky land to grow strawberries and all you do is take
a pick and pick holes in the rocks and plant strawberries
and they will grow. Everybody thought - 'Oh boy we can
do that', and we did it. The next thing we thought was to
have our own strawberry canneries but that's not what the
government thought. The government thought that we
would grow the strawberries, sell them to the white folks
and the white folks would can them. Which is what
happened and then we lost the whole kit. White folks
started bringing in strawberry companies and just hired us
to dig the holes. When they had enough holes, the whole
thing fell down. Our idea has always been to start by
saying - 'well this is the land, we live on the land, doing
whatever you can do but the basic idea is to do more.' Not
in the American sense but to be in the modern world and to
have a living on the land. To live on the land is to have a
living on the land, just to be agricultural workers. In a
way we will always feel at odds with that environmentalists.
Just because they do not see that we have any right to the
land as our right to the land, no matter what we might do
with it.

NP: I was wondering if these issues concerning the stereotypes
of the native and problems with local alliances were also
repeated at the international level. Was your strategy in
representing the American Indian Movement (AIM) at
the UN in Geneva also an attempt to work at an
international level in order to be more effective at the national and
at the state level as well?

JD: We have always worked at an international level. When the
League of Nations started, a man named Deskahde (Ottawa)
to Geneva to plead the case for American Indian Nations, he
was Iroquois. He stayed six or seven more years because
he couldn't get the money to get back and he became a
cLOWN there. Cherokee chiefs went to London to talk to the
Queen to say - 'could you get your colonies to straighten
up please?' When the United Nations first started, the
Siletz sent their chief, the Sioux sent their chiefs. The
Siletz sent someone to San Francisco as they were talking
about the United Nations and said - 'could we be part of
this discussion please?' The desire to negotiate within an
international arena is a constant to us. We define it as just
being part of the world community that we used to be part
of. We don't see it as national versus international because
we always want to act internationally and our proof is
always that we deal with each other. Because the Cherokee
Nation can speak to the Iroquois Nation, this is the proof
of our internationally to us. We don't see anything silly about
this. But the US seems to think that's crazy. So when I first
came to the UN during Wounded Knee, Frank Fools Crow
and two other Sioux chiefs, the three top chiefs of the
Sioux Nation went to the UN in New York. They went
officially from the Sioux Nation, so they were in their
official gear, in official clothes and headdresses, and in
New York this was another clown show. It wasn't seen as
the US are attacking these Indians. The US army has
surrounded these Indians, and they have sent their three top
chiefs to the UN to protest. It wasn't seen that way at all.
They just arrived at the United Nations, they did not know
what else to do. The guards said that they could not come in.
who did they want to see? They wanted to talk to
whoever was in charge, the United Nations. They got their
picture in the paper as clowns. Then two years later we set
up our office and I had the job of doing this a bit more
methodically, that was all. Since it did not work when we
sent our chiefs, let's send someone who maybe knows how
to do things the way they do and follow their tricks. I went
to Salim Salim, who was, at that point, the head of the
League of Non-aligned States, he was the ambassador to
the UN from Tanzania, and sought his advice, but he was perplexed by the case because he couldn’t see how we could be classified as independent nations that had been colonised. The US was not seen as a colonial entity in the UN. Then there began to be the idea of Fourth World People. I saw it as one of the most urgent things to fight. We were not for indigenous rights; we were not for indigenous peoples; we were not for Fourth World peoples. We were for the rights of say, the Cherokee Nation or the Iroquis Confederacy as a nation of people. As soon as we allowed ourselves to be connected to indigenous peoples worldwide, we would have lost any support from the African countries that we needed in the UN. They didn’t want to hear about their own indigenous people in their own countries, they automatically would say: ‘This is part of some primitivism that England has put all of us in.’ ‘Part of our decolonisation process is to get away from that primitivism.’ That’s what all the African countries were on about in the sixties and seventies. To get away from tribalism and to get away from people as defined as part of the land. I was acutely we would lose that support completely and all we would gain would be people who wouldn’t help us. We would gain the environmentalists on some level, who would just be vaguely sympathetic but who wouldn’t be actively helping us. How would they help us? Would they join in our political struggle? They never have, so I did not think that they would. I thought the PLO, as an organisation, might. It might join with us in a political struggle. In the UN, in the seventies, when people still liked the PLO this was a useful alliance.

LT: Did you think that by allying too much with environmentalists this would depoliticise your case?

JD: Yes, especially in those days, when we had to convince people like Salim Salim that we were genuine from a political standpoint, that we were worth his time. It never quite worked. He was very helpful but he never quite believed that we were worth his time. There was no African who ever believed that we had legitimate rights. The Africans, more than the Arabs, more than Europe, more than Russia or China, saw us in terms of Hollywood. If I could sit and talk with someone, as I often did, and say ‘don’t you think that that’s part of the political process?’ Don’t you think that you are colonised into thinking that way about us?’ They might laugh and self-consciously say ‘well yes, you have a point’, but the next day, nothing had changed. It was not true with Algeria; it was not true with Cuba; it was not true with the Communist bloc - they were much more sympathetic.

NP: In order to be acknowledged in the International arena as a political force, you had almost to define yourself as a colonised nation, as a people or state that was colonised and therefore now needed to be liberated, from another state.

JD: Yes, exactly that.

NP: Then the crucial task was how you define yourself as a people, as a collective.

JD: It was very tricky. Everyone got suspicious of me, rightly so I think, because I had a thousand faces. I said this to this group and this to that group, trying to get someone to be on our side. I got known as a kind of Soviet style communist for a while, just because I saw the Soviets were willing to help us in the UN in a certain way. They controlled a lot of little parts of the UN. They really needed to know that what we wanted was socialism in the US and not decolonisation of the Cherokee nation. So, to them I said, ‘yes of course, our problem is class in the US, absolutely,
there's no question, we don't want to be a thousand independent little nations, with our own passports and our own post offices. I wasn't lying, that isn't what we want, 300 independent little groups of people, because the US would just crush us. If we had to have our own post offices and our own borders defended against the US, they would cut off the water supply on their side of the border and that would be it. By saying that to the Russians and the Poles, they became my best buddies. Then the Africans would ask about decolonisation. We would say, 'yes here's our treaty, we are a sort of independent nation, here the US has colonised us and we want to be independent of the US, we have the right and here is the treaty' but proves we are some sort of independent nation just like you! Then I would go back to the reservations, this reservation says it wants total independence from the US, the other one says they want some trusteeship. I say, 'yes, that's our struggle, our struggle is mutual'. It's the problem of having to make one definition of things last forever. All we want are human rights.

In the eighties, the last thing that I did with the Indian movement was when an Indian women's organisation (WAN) asked me to be their spokesman at the UN because they were doing a big conference on water rights. The US had decided to take all of our water rights and their method of doing this was that every reservation had to do what's called 'quantification'. They would give each reservation money and experts to figure out a quantity of water that that reservation needed, by what was needed at that time. It's like the Allotment Act, only it's about water. That quantity of water is what you would get for ever, it could never change, except it might go down if the water level dropped. But, you could never apply for a few more glasses of water; you had to stay at that level of water because they realised that they were going to run out of water. I said to the women's organisation that I could take this on, because here is an issue for which the environmentalists must be on our side, they have to be on our side here, it's finally not in their interest for this water scheme to go through in the West. Everything else has been in the interests of the environmentalists, but when they take away our land the US people are helped, the working class are helped, the environmentalists are helped, the US gets richer. When they take away our gold, the US is helped, it makes the US richer. When they deplete our forests, the US gets richer. So no-one is really in solidarity with us. But when they take away the water, they are taking away everybody's water, because they are not giving it to Los Angeles, they are giving it to something crazy. The first thing I did was to go to all these environmental groups and ... nothing. Even less interest than we had had in the seventies. We were not on their agenda at all and our water rights were just not interesting to them. They did not see it as something they could even think about. There were a few environmentalists in the South West thinking about water rights but in no way thinking that it might be connected to Indian water rights or Indian rights. I had seen several things at the UN about desiccation and I knew that the UN knew that the American West was one of the crisis areas with desiccation, because I was at their conference when they put that on the agenda. That was the craziest time in my life...

LT: Who do you think that you could have made a constructive alliance with at that time?

ID: I thought everyone; I thought it was so clear. But, no-one. No other organisations and there were no black organisations in the early eighties.
LT: Not even the International Labour Organisation? They did pass a declaration on the human rights of indigenous peoples.

JD: It was only a declaration.

NP: Do you think Indian issues in these contexts depend on fashion at certain points?

JD: Never the fashion that it looked like at the time. But you are right it was a fashion at a certain point and then wasn't, but it was never much of a fashion. It was never the fashion that it might now seem when you look back to the little splashes of headlines and things.

LT: Was it, therefore, an appropriation of an image; a surface fashion with no solidity or body to it?

MT: Yes, because any time they were confronted with anything that went into politics, they were confronted with the fact that the Indian addressing them does not fall within their stereotypes, then they dropped it.

HV: I worked very closely with different black organisations. I saw what they could do and they thought that we could do the same thing. I worked with all the black organisations and I saw the solidarity that they got from people. We could not get a thousand of it, we could not get a thousand of the money or support that they got or the cultural solidarity that the blacks had from the Civil Rights Movement.

LT: Do you think that this had to do with the fact that they were asking for a set of abstract rights, whereas the rights the Indian people are asking for involve the question of land and resources?

JD: Absolutely that.

NP: Civil rights are more commensurable with conventional politics than decolonisation is. Let's say that the public didn't respond to Indian movements in one thousand of the way...

JD: ...let me interrupt you. The liberals, the progressives and the rich folks, who supported the black civil rights movement, when we approached them, said - well what you want has to do with your reservations, with your land. So I think, in their minds, they said - this land is like Yellowstone Park, and therefore it is like the environmental movement, therefore it's like keeping the park clean.

Which is the way, I think progressives or radical Jewish lawyers would see the environmental movement. I think a Black Panther would also see it that way. They were all on that side and we were without a side and then when they began to say well, yes these Indians have something that we should fight for - they already had the mindset that this is like Yellowstone Park. Then the Sierra Club says - no it's not like Yellowstone Park because they will mess up Yellowstone Park. They will pollute it. They will shit in the park. Suddenly any support, any development of solidarity that might have started in time, was taken over by what were the agendas of the US, what were the progressive or radical agendas. There was no way for us to enter in the discourse and start a new discourse in the way that the blacks did with the civil rights movement.

NP: Or even join in the discourse? It seems to me that part of the problem was the inability to conceive of a politics that was being articulated in the cities but wasn't just an urban problem. So, in a sense, progressive, left, liberal politics could never really overcome the urban/rural dichotomy that so deeply structured that culture. The moment non-urban
questions were brought forward, the whole residual archaic politics was also ushered into the question, so that the Indian question, when situated in a non-urban context, could not be conceived as a contemporary problem.

JD: In Minneapolis, which is the Sioux headquarters of AIM, there is a very big Indian ghetto, Franklin Street, a famous Indian ghetto and there were some Minneapolis Indians who were a core group of AIM, and still are, their first survival schools, did a lot of things first. Whenever they talked to local politicians, white or black, they would always define their struggle as a struggle for sovereignty, back on the reservation in Northern Minnesota. They did not mean what it seemed like they were meaning, because they were starting our schools right there, running their own schools and their courses were shoplifting, how to survive in the city! They did not see a way to say that our struggle is for human rights here on Franklin Street, they only knew to say that our struggle is for sovereignty on the Red Lake reservation or the White Earth reservation where we are from. It made it very easy for the local mayor or governor or senator to say these Indian rights need to be studied. They would say we are going to put a million dollars into a five year study to study this Indian problem because we see that it is quite complex. I don’t know whatever happens to such studies though.

LT: How do environmentists actually define or see Indian peoples in the US and, in turn, how do Indian people actually define themselves in relation to the people with whom there is the possibility of making some kind of alliance?

JD: I think that that really is complex. There is not an Indian people, there begins to be now - every decade I say there begins to be now. The Cherokee Nation was once more than one million people. We had four distinct dialects, we were a big bunch of people, with a huge land base that went from almost Washington DC down to Northern Florida; from Western Tennessee to the coast. It was bigger than France. We first met the Spanish and the Spanish set up missions. Then we had a fight and we killed the Spanish and then the English came in. From smallpox and everything we started losing population. We started losing war basically when we started losing population. We knew Europeans from the sixteenth century. Other people say that the Sioux Indians were driven on to the Plains, much much later and they did not meet any white people until 1820, something like that. For two hundred years we had been fighting and the Sioux did not know who we might be fighting. They did not know what was happening, they just knew that the Chippewa were driving them out and that they were also losing population from smallpox. Then they got out to the Plains, then they found some horses and became the Plains Indians, then the white people came and started shooting them. So, they think that they are from the Plains now, they do not remember ever being in the forest. I remember when I first went out to work on Pine Ridge, the Great Plains were so strange to me because I am from the forest. It would be just like if I went to Russia, it was such a culture shock. If I say, yes - that Cherokees and Sioux are both Indian - it’s only silliness. We are together in the way - not that the Serbs and Croats are together but the way that the Serbs and the Irish are together - the distance is the same. The language difference is the same. Certainly the religious differences are much bigger.

LT: Is this where problems are located when there is this “grouping” together of five hundred distinct nations as if they are all one and the same people?
JD: It partly plays out because of the history of colonisation. When the English came to Jamestown, they traded with the indigenous peoples for the next hundred years in very specific ways that were quite different from when the US cavalry began treating with the Sioux, which was again different from when the US cavalry began dealing with the Apaches. The Apaches were first in Mexico, they knew the Spanish as Mexicans. Then came the US cavalry and the Baptist Church as one force and the Baptist was quite seductive to Apaches. They did not see it as a colonising force to be fought, they were dying, they did not get to analyse things so easily. But, they said, they're not these fucking Mexicans - look - they are setting up a school for us, they are not killing us or banning us on the head! Even with the US army, the Apaches were quite relieved I think, because they already knew the Mexican army. It's a history of how you are colonised, so in the State of Oklahoma now, all Indians are stupidly racist against black people, just because it is the State of Oklahoma. Everybody is stupidly racist towards black people. You can't live in Oklahoma in some pure state, you can't live in a black community. The University of Oklahoma football team is called "Boomers", the oil boom, but Indians go to this football game and shout "Boomer State, Boomer State". Why are the Indian people on the side of the idiots who took your land and killed you? - Cos it's our team!!

NP: It seems that stereotypes and these processes of fixing an identity on the Other is the right hand of colonialism.

JD: Absolutely.

NP: Do you think that the contemporary stereotypes of the Indian, and the problems of neocolonialism in the United Nations are influenced by images of Hollywood?

JD: Yes of course they were, except that it begins with the US story. So you can say that James Fennimore Cooper invented Hollywood. The US story invents its aspects. There is something funny in Oklahoma. Most of the Hollywood cowboys come from a couple of ranches in Oklahoma. One of them is the ranch that Will Rogers worked at, a great Cherokee Comedian. They started in the 1880's or the 1870's, they started out as a show ranch, these two ranches - they were big, prosperous working ranches and they were also very self-conscious ranches, conscious of being cowboys, already in the 1870's. Look here are the Indians, we live with the Indians and we can kill them and take their land, very self-consciously doing something about the myth of the America West, which they themselves were making at the time. By 1915, those ranches were exporting people to Hollywood. All the early cowboys in Hollywood were actual cowboys from those two ranches in Oklahoma, even up until The Wild Bunch, one of the old cowboys who's in all the Western movies but never a lead, he is from that ranch and here is as an old cowboy. When George Washington was president it was already something that he had lived with the Cherokee for a while as a young man, it was already in the air as a way of authenticating him as a new American, as a frontiersman, which of course he wasn't; nothing like that; the frontiersman as 'how to be an American', very democratic about it so that you could be friends with the Indian as you were killing them. That got locked in very early. At the same time, who blacks were got locked into that, so that even the US white people kind of knew, before Malcolm X ever told black people that there were field niggers and house niggers, that there were always ways of getting over as a black person. The US knew how to make these stereotypes, how to celebrate the stereotypes and how to keep jostling them, black people back into the stereotypes, by friendly ways, not just lynching. By using
this set of myths of who the American white people are, the nice frontiersmen who had buddies who were blacks and Indians and then he black says 'yes, I'll be your buddy because you're being so nice about it.' Nobody ever says that, it just gets played out constantly. So they are then acting in ways that will gain the approval of your buddies or your perceived buddies, your possible buddies.

LT: In the first essay in your book A Certain Lack of Coherence, you discuss how romanticism becomes a divisive and oppressive tool. Does that come into this here?

JD: Yes, it very much does. I used to have a lot of talks with Paul Smith, a Comanche guy, about the fact that we really cannot know too much about who we might have been pre-Columbus. We've been through too many wars and we've lost too much population and we didn't write much down. We cannot remember many songs because we've lost ninety-eight per cent of the population. You might think that you do, but you've probably lost ninety-eight per cent of your stories.

NP: The stereotypes that are projected by others are often internalised within your own history. Has this affected the way you connect with other artists or activists?

JD: Maybe this answer will be a little mystical sounding. I met a Cherokee artist Kay Walkingstick, she came to my house because I wanted her in the show that Jean Fisher and I curated. I just met her at that time. She doesn't know how seriously our families are on different sides of the political fence. It's like an Irish situation. Her family is really on the enemy side of my family. We liked each other so much it was as though we needed each other, we just felt completely relaxed and completely at home from the very beginning. I was in Plauen, in Bohemia and I met Arthur Renwick who I'd met once just briefly before in Montreal. All the time we were in Bohemia, we hung out together, we were best buddies just because we could relax with each other, we didn't say that, we just did it, we knew that we were a couple of redskins who could hang out; it was just that. It seems to always happen, we might be politically against someone but when you're out in the world, you would gladly be with that Indian, even if it's a Sioux or Iroquois. We're not Indians, we're not the same, but in fact by now we have a similarity of some sort. We like each other more, in a certain kind of way, we can relax with each other. I don't think this is easily articulated and I haven't seen anyone articulate it before, but I see it among Indians constantly. At the same time we don't support each other very much, we just hang out together as a way of relaxing.

With my work at the UN, I was lucky because I had previously led such a privileged life in Geneva. I did know all sorts of different African political workers and I knew people who were in political organisations, that were fighting and they were going to get their freedom. I knew the vocabulary to speak. If I hadn't known it, and I knew that if I hadn't known it, I couldn't have gotten anywhere. I couldn't have used the vocabulary that the three chiefs who went to the UN, who didn't know how to dress for the UN and they didn't know the vocabulary for talking to people like Salim. But, I think because of that, I never had, or imagined I had, even a semi-close friend who was a white American. It's still true that my white friends are European or from some place else. I just would not be willing to forgive so much on a daily basis, as you must if you know an American white man. There's so much that they are willing to tolerate against you, everyday I think.
I: Do you think that, in some way, they have a stake - they think they have something to lose?

J: I had a dream once, but it has stayed with me a long long time. I'm from an area of Arkansas, next to Oklahoma. It's very close to where Bill Clinton is from, but my side of it is desolate, just very badly run down, hardly even there, when I was a kid, it was already bad. I know an American white guy, a farmer who now lives in California, he lived in Mexico and he would come by my house and we would talk and he always ask me where I was from, my land and so on. Partly to check out my authenticity, Americans always do that, so I dreamed that I had taken him back home, and suddenly noticed, when I got there, that everyone was dead and all the land was burned and black and there was nothing left alive at all. I went down to the creek and there were three little black birds only about an inch or so, hiding under a log and they said "don't tell him we're here". That dream stays with me and Jay Johnson never said "I want to go back with you, he just started questioning me about home, and suddenly something in my brain said - don't tell him where.

N: That reminds me of a John Berger story. It had a memorable line in it which says - when the first axes went into the forest, the trees whispered to themselves, "the handle, it's a handle of an".

N: Can you talk a little more about your project Here at the Centre of the World; now did the idea come about?

J: It began quite slowly, in Mexico, where I did live close to the centre of the world, which was an actual tree. When you go to a tree, you see that it marks the centre of the world, there's no argument about it. There is also a magnolia tree, close to where I grew up, that also marks the centre of the world and you can't argue with that either. It is very clear that that magnolia tree marks the centre of the world. I already had the idea, what a coincidence that I am so often at the centre of the world! There is a Cherokee saying about when one travels that "I got there and I saw that half the world was before me and half the world was behind me", therefore I was at the centre. Then, coming to Brussels, thinking about having lived in Europe before, when Geneva was more or less the centre of the world. But the hope of the freedom of money is the new centre of the world. So Brussels is the new centre of the world because it is here that we are hoping that we will get enough money to free us up. That we will have peaceful democracy, brought about by capitalism, that is the Brussels hope and the new European hope.

So, once again I am in the centre of the world, I am in Brussels, the new centre of the world. Then, I was immediately asked last year to do this show in Middelburg which is already a funny contradiction because even Holland agrees to call itself The Netherlands. How can you call yourself the Netherlands, how can you be a Nether to yourself? If you are The Netherlands, you have to call the rest of the world the Netherlands because the rest of the world is neither to you! Then for there to be this city called Middelburg in the Netherlands seems too strange! Then I started thinking that Europe has all these centres at different times and I find myself doing something with them, so I am doing a show next year in Vienna which has always been the centre of the European world and still thinks of itself as the centre that bridges Asia and Europe. It seemed like there was something worth playing with, the idea of political space and what political space has to do with any kind of other space. They do think that there is a Europe and there is an Asia and you might say that the
Ural Mountains is the dividing line, but someone else does not agree. I don’t think there is, there is just Eurasia.

NP: So, in a way, this project Here at the Centre of the World, is an exploration of all the different margins of the world in a way.

JD: Yes, exactly that. The thing I am doing in Yakutsk in Siberia, with the City Museum of Pori, Finland, is a project which goes around the Arctic Circle, and it relates to a theory of human migration which suggests that people came from Siberia, across the Bering Straits and into the New World. But, they say that there were no humans originally in the New World. Which we used to hear all the time and I thought that we would not have to hear it any more, because the assumption is always that there were original humans only in Europe. We know that that is not the case, we know that we are all from Africa. The fact that some people stopped in Paris and some people went on to Cleveland does not make much difference since we are all from Nairobi!

NP: What do you plan to do in Yakutsk?

JD: I am going to take a mirror with me. Like the figure Kristeva discusses always travelling with a German book, which was a mirror. He said, this is my mirror. I carry along this book in German that I am reading, wherever I am in the world. I can see myself by reading a book of my own language, my own people. It’s a very sweet idea, a very gentle idea. It has nothing to do with any truth or power, or whether it is right or wrong. It is really an eccentric idea. Kristeva said that this is narcissistic love, he is using his reflection, as his mirror when he is out with the other people. It means he must first be in love with himself and Kristeva’s idea is that you can’t love someone else until you love yourself. This seems like a Californian way of putting it, it sounds to me like the beginning of her book on love. I thought, what if you did not do that? What if you did not bring the baggage with you? Because, Yakutsk is no further away from me than Brussels is. Yakutsk is maybe closer to me than Brussels, except I happen to be in Brussels at the moment. I am not sure in what way I am in Brussels.

When I used to be nostalgic and tell everybody stories about my home, because I come from a very special place and it’s about Cherokee apples, which are real apples. They are black on the outside and red on the inside, very sweet, magic apples. No-one would believe me because they are only Cherokee apples, they don’t grow outside of any area in Arkansas. I think that they are not there any more either. I haven’t seen one since I was ten. Everybody thinks that it is one of my silly stories. When we were coming up from a subway station, here in Brussels that is under the Berlaymont building, which was intended to be the centre of the European Union. But, it had too much asbestos, so it’s just a giant vacant mausoleum. It’s a great big building, completely vacant and will probably stay completely vacant because they don’t know how to clean it up, it’s too big. So, right across the street they built the new headquarters for EU. The subway comes up under it. I came up at the back of it and there were two of these apple trees, this was in June so the apples were still young. I looked at them and I said – Maria Theresa, wait, I think these are my apples, I went over and got one, it wasn’t quite black on the outside because they were still green. I took one and bit into it and sure enough it was an apple and I said – see! see! this is my apple! I was so pleased to see them, to see them there at the real, vacant centre of the new world. It seemed too strange. At the time I was looking for a present to give a new godchild in Ghent,
friends of mine had a baby and they asked me to be the godparent. So, I quickly wrote her a map of where this apple tree is and a description of what kind of apple it was and the whole story. It's in a very fun place. This street is called Street of the Law, and the other street is called Charlotteswood Street. Just over here is the Europe Hotel and over here is old Black Pub and here is the vacant cent of the world. So I drew that map - this is where your apple tree is and when you get older you have to go, I just wrote her a letter and that was the gift. There was still one left and a Filipino film maker asked me to join a project he was doing about Hiroshima and Nagasaki and a Filipino artist who had died of AIDS. He was going to put everything together. So I said, okay - I'll give you the other apple tree and we'll do a text about it. Here's the same map and here's the same text and you get one apple tree and my goddaughter gets the other one. So I thought, I've done something nice here. I promised my goddaughter that in September I would go back and get some of the apples, get the seeds and give her the seeds of an apple tree to plant in a more safe place, that would be her second present. So, sure enough, last weekend I did, and it's completely cemented over. Not even a trace of the two apple trees. Not even a sign that there were ever any apple trees there. You have to go into the world with no baggage, with no mirror, with no way to do anything but...I don't know what we're supposed to do.

Except there is that story that I wrote about Quetzalcoatl and his brother. It's a very nice story. Quetzalcoatl had a brother whose name translates as "Smoking Mirror". For fifty two years Quetzalcoatl rules the world and he is a very handsome, plumed serpent, but he is also kind of a dandy. Every morning he has to put on his make-up and he is the god of good times, but his brother, Smoking Mirror is the god of art and industry, so he is the black smoke character and he is also the one who brings corn, most of the crops come from the ugly brother. He really is ugly, he is missing his left foot and he is burned practically to cinders, all scarred up, practically a skeleton face and his chest is torn open and his heart is beating ready to be plucked like a grape, he's a super ugly man. Every fifty two years he comes back and visits Quetzalcoatl and says, let's have a party. I'm your brother, I've just come up from underground and have some of this tequila, let's sing and dance, and Quetzalcoatl gets completely drunk and stupid. The next morning he wakes up, he has a horrible hangover and his brother pulls out his mirror and says -look at yourself! Aren't you ashamed? I'm going to take over, you're not good enough to run this world, I'm going to run the world. Quetzalcoatl goes underground for fifty two years and ugly brother rules the world for the next fifty two years.

The only way I can be Indian now, the only way I can be Cherokee now, is nostalgically. I can tell the stories but anyone can tell any stories now, stories don't have the weight that we need them to have, they're not the proper baggage. When you open your suitcase full of stories it doesn't serves you the way it might once have served us.

LT: Could you talk about the Indian Arts and Crafts Act?

JD: The first thing to say about it is that it is a sign of how badly my side lost, how badly the American Indian Movement side lost. In the 1890s, there was an Allotment Act, and the Allotment Act said - you get this much land per family and no communal land. Every enrolled member gets this much land and you have to do an enrolment, you have to say who is a member of your community and the head of each household gets land. For Cherokees especially, but for every Indian group it was correctly seen
as against our nationhood. That we were to be treated as individuals and as heads of families as the guys were the only individuals, no longer even as tribes at that point, only as individuals, much less nations. The Cherokees went back to war over that. The war ended in 1923 with a great huge shoot-out between the Cherokees and the US.

Government in Oklahoma. My family was part of that. It’s a serious thing to us, it’s very serious and it’s not old history. It’s in my father’s times, my father knew and told me those stories, he was part of that. Then in the thirties, Roosevelt came along with a progressive idea for Indians, the New Deal for Indians. He said, ‘if you form a tribe under our US auspices, under the protection of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) we will recognise that Tribal Council. We will not recognise your old government under any circumstances. But, we will recognise a colonial government if you make it under the BIA.’ That was the choice that Roosevelt gave us. Everybody said no. Roosevelt said, ‘well we will do it for you because we want it done this way.’ People went back to war in the thirties, which lasted through the fifties and people were still being killed, even in places like New York State over that very thing, ever Roosevelt’s “progress”. So the government did what it did and it’s a steamroller because it poured money in and, on Pine Ridge for example, the people said we will never go through this enrolment act. So, it set up two camps by the fifties. We were severely divided into what the government called the traditional, which was most Indians, the impoverished Indians, the militant Indians, and what the government called the progressives. They call themselves progressives and we call ourselves the traditionalics which makes us sound like we support the Pope or something! That was the fight at Wounded Knee, every fight within the AIM, AIM was the traditional, the traditional as organised by crazy criminals from the cities. The artists and writers of the Indian world have always been from the progressive side, because that’s the side that’s given education, the rest of us were not given education and so we’re not the artists and writers.

LT: Is one side in favour of this kind of legislation and one not?

JD: By the time the legislation comes up, everything is erased. All those differences are erased. AIM lost, we were destroyed as an organisation and we lost everything we fought for. Then Reaganism came along and we lost more things. We lost our own schools, even though they were BIA schools, at least they were on the reservations. Suddenly we have to go to regular public school. We lost our own hospitals which we didn’t like because they were run by horrible racist doctors but at least they were by our communities. At least there might be an Indian nurse there or at least there would be other sick Indians next to you.

NP: So any parallel institutional space which might then challenge the authority of the state was dismantled?

JD: That’s right. Our struggle went away, we lost and we lost everything, we really severely lost. The next generation of young Indians didn’t know what the struggle was. In the early eighties when I would go around to different universities where there would be Indian students, I would meet people whose parents, whose aunts and uncles had been at Wounded Knee. They would ask me what was it? Even when was it? Was it in the fifties? They didn’t know when Wounded Knee happened and this was only ten years later. They say to me, tell us a few stories about Wounded Knee, that’s how badly we lost. We lost even the ideal of bringing us into the world. In that situation we got popular and US people started liking Indians.
NP: Because you were victims?

JD: They didn't see that we lost because they never see us at all, they didn't notice that we were getting poorer, they didn't see us or our agenda; just because we lost, because we were in their faces at all, they could go back to their romantic idea and hold onto silly novels by white people like the Carlos Castaneda types. Suddenly everyone was wearing what they thought was Indian clothing again.

The Indian art that got very popular was not the Indian art that we were viewing before, not the Indian art that Kevin Redstar did in the sixties and seventies. It wasn't very good art but it was very political art, a painting with a political message but that's not so bad in the sixties and seventies. I like it better than I like Robert Reiman. It's the Indian art that's romantic paintings of victimized Indians or sweet Indians that is really horrible bad art; it's almost like paintings on velvet of children with big eyes - it's almost that bad. It's a multi-million dollar business and it's a whole bunch of cow skulls or buffalo skulls all properly inlaid with silver and turquoise, machine done. Then it kind of translates back to the Tribal Councils, these people who run the reservations, they are against us and we are against them, but they're our Tribal Chairman.

So we go back to the shoot-out in 1923. When they did the Cherokee allotment, there were already a whole bunch of folks who saw that you could get 360 acres free, all you have to do is say that you're a Cherokee. That happened very quickly and they had the money. So, to pay the man who was doing the enrolment and we didn't have the money to pay. After we lost in 1923, because we are civilised; part of the five civilised tribes, we didn't get the regular New Deal from Roosevelt. We had instead, until Wilma Mankiller, (who I'll get to in a while), we didn't have a Tribal Council, instead the US president directly appointed a chief for us, most of whom were corrupt five dollar bill men.

So, some fool comes along and says - we need to protect our arts and crafts from Koreans and "wannabe Indians". There is no one to say - don't trust the Federal Government to protect you, be careful, remember what the Enrolment Act is, remember what our Tribal Councils are, there is no one to say these things to anyone. Because the intellectual art world is displaced from the reservations, the Indian side is not being considered, only two sides of artists, those who seek to protect by referring to blood, authenticity and identity and those who object to the legislation because it excludes them. It's only those two sides, they're both away from any Indian agenda, because AIM lost, because the political agenda has no way of being put forward and the political agenda comes from the people on the reservations not from any ideology in some university.

LT: But, I read in the Lakota Times that there are people there successfully invoking the Indian Arts and Crafts Act in order to combat what they see as "plastic shamans". There are people on the reservation who are actually using it in order to prosecute white people who are marketing themselves as "genuine native shamans" and to get certain pottery removed from the shelves from stores which has been made in elsewhere rather than in Arizona and so on.

JD: But I think that it is very tricky. I think most Indian crafts are more fake than the Korean fakes because Indian crafts are destructive to Indian communities; Korean crafts are not. The ones we make are destructive to us.

LT: Why?
JD: If your job, when you are colonised and you have no power, is to make souvenirs of your culture for commercial use, you are doing what the government says Indians do. People like that. Indians like to do that because you are so alienated, you are so insecure, you need that proof. So, a whole bunch of Indians on reservations do beadwork because it makes them feel Indian to do beadwork, not because they have an urge in the blood to do beadwork; not because it is part of their cultural community to do beadwork. It makes you feel Indian to do beadwork at a time when the entire set-up is saying to you - you’re not real - you’re not the Indian that your grandfather was. If you do pottery, if you weave a blanket and do some beadwork - you’re doing that because you see and you’re not - you’re doing the opposite of what you would tell yourself. If you do things that are “Indian” to sell commercially I think you are necessarily distorting your community because you are destroying the identity by doing it as though it was the identity and then doing and selling it. Every time someone buys it, it is reinforced that that is your identity. That’s the trap that artists also have.

NP: You refused both to take on the act and to sign up. And then there is your public statement: “I am not an American Indian, nor have I ever seen or sworn allegiance to India. I am not a Native American”, nor do I feel that America has any right to either name me or un-name me. I have previously stated that I should be considered mixed-blood: that is, I claim to be a male but in fact only one of my parents was male.” This is in fact a statement against the way the government would locate your identity and how you would be expected to behave and therefore commodify your culture for the consumption of the officially sanctioned commercial trading culture. So the refusal wasn’t a distancing from your community, but was a rejection of the way in which that community was being defined into the discourse of trade. But a lot of people inerpret it the other way, that you are turning your back on things and that you were trying to proclaim the law of the universal artist there.

JD: I am certainly turning my back on any organised Cherokee notion because it is not there. To pretend that it is there, especially since Wilma Mankiller became very ill and gave up the position of Chief - she was the first freely elected president we ever had and the only hope that we had - is to play the US Government game against yourself, against the Cherokee Nation. It’s the Cherokee Nation that is against the Cherokee Nation; if they say we do not recognise you because you are not enrolled, I have already said that to them - I don’t recognise you. So, I started the “not-recognition” because they’re not enrolled! Whenever may come or whatever might be of the four acres worth of Cherokee Nation, they can have it, I don’t want to be part of it. I’m not part of that Cherokee Nation, never have been part of that Cherokee Nation that has now a president, a vice-president and a secretary for public relations.

NP: But what does this mean about the notion of community today?

JD: I was hoping earlier that there would be, not a group of like-minded people, but that there would always be intellectuals with an intellectual agenda. I don’t see that there is any other human agenda but intellectuality and that is the very thing that we are so distrustful of these days. We do everything to deny intellectuality as our agenda, but I still want the Enlightenment in the sense that I want us to say, ‘we should be using our brains to think about things so that we become the humans that our brains might allow us to become if we think about it a little more’; that kind of
intellectuality. Politically committed intellectuality. You
don’t see any other intellectuality, you don’t see
intellectualty of pure thought or something because we are
not in an angelic situation, we are in an earthly situation.
So, not of like-minded people but just of intellectuality. In
the art world it is practically against the law again to come
cut for intellectuality, to be on the side of thinking, it’s
certainly not commercially viable. Strategically I have to
shift up and say, ‘I don’t know’. Every question has to
answered with Andy Warhol and Warholian statements so
that you will be recognised as an artist - yes, that’s an
artist’s statement, I saw Andy Warhol do that once! There
are signs. I put myself in a circle of people who grab my
interest and I think that this is my community but it’s not
those people who are necessarily my community. It is
intellectuality itself, not a sentimental idea of intellectuality
that has to be my community.

NP: It appears that you are searching for a more rigorous
notion of intellectuality.

JD: I truly think that we're headed for bad times. I see too
many signs that look so me like...and whenever I try to
talk about it, it looks like I'm prophesying, which I think
I'm not. I'm not prophesying the next war, I don't think
there will be a next war, I don't see anything but business
and preparations for badness, that's what I see or else I
don't see intellectuality fighting it.

NP: For a long time you so lived in New York. What made
you leave New York?

JD: We finally had the money so that we could leave. The only
thing that ever kept us in New York was that we didn't
have the money to get out of New York.

NP: I wonder whether your project, Hare at the Centre of the
World also related to living in a city like New York or like
London, where so many corners of the world are colliding.
In cities like New York and London I don't think it is
possible to ever forget that the act of grounding one's
identity is caught up with a process of collision. It seems to
me that sometimes we call that cosmopolitanism,
sometimes we call it urban nightmare, and now, in some
ways, you're taking the two sides of that idea, of
cosmopolitanism - we could be anywhere in the world, at
home wherever we are, and also the idea that multiple
differences in collision produce hell. You're taking that
idea for a walk around the world.

JD: Yes, it's like that.

NP: I make that comment in a sense as a question rather than a
description because I wonder whether you could have ever
done that work in New York?

JD: I think it might be perceived as romanticism in New York,
because the melting pot and it's insoluble solutions is too
loaded a metaphor in New York. There are too many
stories in New York and the stories began to be gossip.

NP: What is missing is a form of listening and response.

JD: That's what I need, I need responses. Sometimes I need to
know that I don't know; someone else knows it - not some
one person, the knowledge is right around the corner in the
sense of we are on the verge of desperately needing to
know something - all of us, maybe therefore we might
learn it and therefore a piece of it might be in Yakutsk with
somebody and they might tell me and I might have a little
bit more knowledge than I did before.
NP: Is it because stories were becoming like commodities in the same way that Indian art was becoming a commodity. I often have this feeling that sometimes people ask me simple questions, like what I did this summer; and when they ask that question, I feel such weight that I just say, 'I saw my mum and dad for the first time'. I don't explain that this was the first time I had met them in Greece. I just can't be bothered and I feel such a weight and deadening force in the air that I can't tell them what it meant. I feel that that weight and that negativity are do to with the fact that they want the story either as a bit of information that they can use, or as a bit of entertainment that will titillate them. For me there is always this fear that when you're telling something that you already know, each repetition is like a plane going over a piece of wood and you are frightened that if you tell it one more time that it will disappear.

JD: That's perfectly the way it is!

NP: Do you feel that the stories you are now writing are exercises in search of an audience?

JD: Except then it becomes miraculous and kind of horrible at the same moment. W. B. Yeats in the process I find loaded non-things like the Linden Tree in Lisbon. I said to Maria Theresa: I must be the only one alive who knows this many things about linden trees. First how to recognise that this is a linden tree and then the bark is good for this, the tea is good for this, etc. Knowledge is so specialised now. But I'm like a raconteur. You have to be an omnivore because you starve to death if you're not an omnivore. I'm too intellectually poor to not be an omnivore so I have a wider sweep of less knowledge, but no specialisation. Then when you find miraculous surprises of knowledge you already have, there's a responsibility. For instance, I can say: Here I am in Bohemia and I find a linden tree and it's just like the one that I've just found in Lisbon. What does the world possibly need that knowledge for? Then you have to say is anything useful that I might be doing? If I put that question out as I intend to put it out to you, with a piece of the linden wood, hoping that you will either take it or send it to Greece...I have it all as parts of a body and I am giving it to different people to take to different places and send back to me, so you are my Greek bearer! Then I'll take all that back, after it's been all around the world and the story is still ridiculous, it still makes no sense, it's not really interesting as anything. Yet I think, well, I did find these linden trees after all. I don't know what else to do so I might as well take some of this wood and fix it up and see if anybody is interested.

NP: But it makes me think again that everything we've been circling around is related to the contemporary status of myth and storytelling. It seems to me the myths that we create for ourselves today are, in a sense, surprisingly familiar.

JD: I think that it's hard to get away from the story side of myth, but it's especially hard for me to get away from, just because I'm not normally a smart guy. I have to work at my intelligence I have. I'm not a clear thinker, so even when I do a sentence that I want to tell a story to illustrate it. I think Laura Mulvey writing in my Phaidon Press book understood something of my way of working, that is to have the material first, and the material begins to talk, and I begin to think because I'm working with the material. Not because a grape looks like an eaveball, not because the material reminds me of other material, but to say - what is this grape? What are those seeds and what is this kind of mucky playing with it? Not intellectual play where I say this looks like a basketball, but monkey
playing like-what's that, what's that, what's that??? So then, any mythologizing in an actual piece comes usually from another place. I make something and then I join that something to another something and there begins a kind of political work and it begins to be political at that point. I did this piece. These Forbidden Things in Los Angeles, it's a fake airport thing that you pass through to detect weapons, a metal detector. Then up at the top it has a sign with three abstract drawings and a whole bunch of people said- I know what two of these are, but I don't know what the third one is. But they weren't anything, they were just abstract things, but everyone was quite sure that they were something, that they knew what the work was, that they knew what I had done but that they didn't quite have the key as to what all three were. In other words people are sure that they see what you did instead of seeing themselves looking at what you did; instead of seeing themselves in the process of the art, you're the artist - you made the art and they are the receivers and they will receive the art and that's a naive idea, that's a strange little idea.

LT: Is it part of the idea that everything can and will be understood? There is no acceptance of the fact that you might not really get to grips with this or accept things as they are- this has to be understood, this has to be interpreted, it has to be explained in order to "mean" something in a strange way?

NP: It's a way also of expecting the visual experience to be explained by the written and the spoken language. I think a lot of problems with the critical reception of contemporary art is in the subordination of the visual experience to a linguistic explanation of it.

JD: I think one always does have a political responsibility, just as a human being, that is to be human. You have a responsibility to pull a child out of the street, it's that kind of basic responsibility. I didn't stop art and start doing politics because I was interested in politics and I didn't start doing art because I was interested in art either, it's just that you find yourself in a position where the situation calls for a certain thing and you can't do anything else because the entire situation has set up itself where you say- yes I have to get the baby out of the street, or whatever it might be.

NP: Is that what you mean in that essay when you said- I don't do political art, I do what is necessary?

JD: Yes, even though I have no idea what might be necessary. I wish I knew what necessary meant!!

NP: But you realise with hindsight what was necessary? Is it a way of saying that the art work comes, not from a single idea, but from that complex amalgam of forces that create an energy of a particular type?

JD: When I first started doing the work in New York, which was after I left the Indian Movement and Maria Theresa ran away from home, we were living in New Jersey and I was supposed to be writing a history of the Indian Movement; that was the goal I set myself. But, it was too close and I couldn't do it and I was still working with Paul Smith and we were fighting and nothing was happening. Life was strange. I began doing art work again and I had done four or five pieces that were kind of like collages and assemblages, things which you hung on a wall which looked kind of like paintings, but about specific situations, they explained our struggle. One was about the horrible computerisation of everybody's life on the Rosebud
reservation. Maria Theresa had this friend, Juan Sanchez, who was a political painter from Puerto Rico. She invited him over because he was doing a show called Beyond Aesthetic; she said you should see my friend JD's work, he doesn't have any aesthetics! He came over, liked the work, and said I'm going to put these three in the show that I'm doing. That was my first show in New York in 1980/1981. The New York art world liked them. People who saw the work said that it was great work and I hadn't expected that response. I was still in the movement, the response I expected was - that's happening now on the Rosebud? Let's see what we can do! That's the response I expected. Talks about naive, but I really expected that. Then when they were appraised, when people liked them and still didn't organise against controlled data corporation, I said there's something about art that I don't like here. I'm going to do something else; what else should I do? Suddenly I'm in the art world again because I'm popular and Juan Sanchez did another show immediately afterwards and I was in that too. Changed the idea in the second show, but not very much, I just added some irony. I kind of accused them of not doing anything. They liked that too, they thought that was also great. So, then I said, I have to find a way to challenge what they think is not there; to be challenged, I have to challenge something that is unknown in challenging, because they already know everything that I'm doing. I'm not getting enough to anyone, everyone knows what I'm going to say next and they like what I say next. So I don't have to say it I can just say; 'what I already said!' That's a funny thing that American blacks do and I like it very much. Some guy says something good and the other guy says, 'what he said!' As though you don't have to say it, it's already been said. I don't want to live my life saying what I have already said and being applauded for it because that really is betrayal of your people; that really is betrayal of the struggle.

NP: Can we return to the question of stereotypes and the techniques of "passing"?

JD: It gets very predictable. I know quite a bit about Belgian history and European history and I know much more about the local wildlife than they do, which is expected; they expect me to just magically know that. But people say things like, 'your work seems to so much more European now', I say, 'in what way? They say, 'it doesn't seem to be so Indian oriented now', and I say, 'what piece was Indian oriented?' 'Well, your work has always been...' it kind of goes like that. I'm having to try to strategically formulate responses that are fresh and spontaneous that say, 'I'm still as authentic as I used to be but I'm trying to speak to you about here, I'm trying to be here, would you please allow me to be here at this moment and forget wherever we both might have been yesterday. But it has to be articulated strategically and I haven't found a way to do it. I'll tell another story, another city, not Belgium. A very famous dealer/collector said, "you seem so nice and last time I saw you, you were very mean and belligerent." I hadn't even remembered having met her. But I do remember having been mean and belligerent too many times in my life so I agreed with her and said, 'it's just because I'm trying to be civilised now. I'm living in Europe; I want to be part of civilisation, I like European civilisation as an idea and I want to participate in the project.' She liked that answer very much, she was pleased because I had struck a note between authenticity as a savage and enough intelligence to talk about my savagery. I confronted her with that line. Then she said, 'but are you really full-blood Cherokee?' I said, 'who knows if there is any such thing, but I'm not one' and she said, 'but that would be nice wouldn't it - to be a full-blood Cherokee?' I said, 'I suppose it would - yes.' We were best buddies from that moment on, we're still best buddies. It's
the point where I allayed all of her fears, I answered her
criticisms and I behaved in a way that made me
trustworthy and not mean and belligerent anymore even
though she remembered having liked me because I was
mean and belligerent — that's why I stood out in her
memory.

NP: When you talk about certain gaps and failures in the art
world, do you mean a sort of lack of conceptual
apparatus to deal with what is being made here and now?

JD: Conceptual apparatus and the will to continue an
intellectual project, I think those two things together. It's
true that no-one knows what sort of things to say about art.
It's partly because art keeps trying to strike you dumb.

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NP: When you really face art you are agast for a long time. It
takes a long time to find words. The 'tactile dialogue' you
described earlier is a way of moving from symbols to
metaphors, but it is also a way of facing the gaps and
'misfit' between different languages. Do you find the term
'hybridity' helpful for identifying this process?

JD: I would like to answer your question in the broadest
possible way and to do that I want to tell specific
anecdotes. I want to make a framework of universality that
says something about human nature, where we are as
humans, to make it seem as if I know what I'm talking
about with my specifics. If I imagine that the state of
humanity is that we are oppressed by humanity then I say
that our human purpose is to free ourselves from human
oppression. The Osage, in Oklahoma, at one point they
were quite militant and they beat the US army a few times
and they captured the army bugles. They incorporated that
music and that captured instrument into their traditional
music and it's famously there now in anthropology. So here
is an Osage song that everyone is singing and there are
drums and in the middle of it, the guy comes up with the
bugle and plays the same tune over and over again and
that's all he has to play, he doesn't know another song. He
knows the song that he heard just as he grabbed it out of the
mouth of the US army soldier! They did it
celebratorily in the beginning. They are saying here is our
music and in the middle of this you tried to interrupt us and
all you knew was this song and we stole even your song
from you! That's what they were doing. Then twenty years
later when they are defeated and they are still playing
exactly the same thing for the anthropologists and it's
recorded for anthropology, it's no longer a celebratory
song, it's only a souvenir. At that point it's against their
culture, it's not part of their culture because they didn't use
that bugle, they only used it for that one moment and
anthropology stole it from them soon after. They had no
more use for it and therefore they had no more use for their
own song either. Osage music, where is it now? It stopped
at that point, there is no more Osage music.

The only American Indian music that became viable came
out of the Peyote cult that was Mexican and US. Everyone
who was militant in the fifties did peyote, was part of the
Peyote cult, there was no other way to be militant. To be
militant was to be what was then called, Pan-Indian. How
to get away from your own little community struggle and
universalise it for all Indians, which for us, meant US and
Mexican, later it included Canada. It was the attempt to
blend Mexican Catholicism, South-West Catholicism which
had been put on us with the Peyote Cult that seemed like it
might be the connection between those two things. It
seemed like it might be the way for all of us to make
ourselves Pan-Indian, become hybrid. I think people now
very much misunderstand what that Peyote cult was. It was called the Native American Church, then it became the American Indian Church.

One of the first things that I tried to do when I got to Geneva and saw that all kinds of churches were there, I went and made friends with the secretary of the World Council of Churches and said, ‘I’m part of the Native American Church and perhaps you might like to invite our church into your World Council of Churches’. He said, ‘I didn’t know you had such a thing - what’s it like?’ I said, ‘well we take peyote and peyote is the same as Jesus so...’ suddenly he lost interest. Peyote wasn’t the same as Jesus, he already knew what Jesus was, it was wheat crackers - that was clear, what was not clear was why I wanted us to be part of his gang!

When you take peyote in the church you remember all the peyote songs that were ever sung. You can sing them even if you never heard them before. Nobody else is singing, you remember a song and start singing it. Everyone else remembers it. It has been recorded and in fact it is a song that has been sung before but you didn’t know it at that moment because you’d never heard it before. We didn’t need recorded anthropological proof to know that, we knew that. The priest who’s called the Roadman, told us that. As we’re going under as we’re taking our peyote and chewing it, as he gives it to us out of his own mouth he is preaching and his preaching is always politics it’s never religion in those days. Now it is only religion, I went back to the church in the eighties and the late seventies and it’s only religion. It was only Jesus if you believe in peyote it will save you, he will save you. But in the early days it wasn’t that way, from the turn of the century until the fifties it was - we take this peyote, we take this Jesus, we take this holy thing among us as long as we walk our Indian path which the Roadman told us to walk. As long as we support each other, as long as we sing our old songs and remember our history we can be free. That was the gist of every sermon with lots of embellishments and personal testimonies and that sort of churchy thing. The point was never faith in the something and then you will be free, it was we together will do our way together and then politically we will be free. In the sixties politics took over and the church went away, then the seventies, eighties, politics were defeated and the church came back as a regular Christian church. It came back in a bad way. Those are “into the fray” remarks.

Everyone knows that one of the good definitions of the US is the music and the music is black music. The sound of the US is the sounds that black people make in their music whether it’s blues, jazz or rock and roll, defined by the sound of music and that’s black people that did that. It’s celebrated as being a hybrid, as being what people do, blending in a new situation; that’s a cliche of what’s jazz, what’s blues - that is a hybrid thing. When I look at the same phenomenon; first, I’m jealous that we can’t do it. That we’re stuck with our anthropological bugle, we’re stuck with a cute story that didn’t develop into music. I say, ‘why didn’t we? Why couldn’t we? Why couldn’t our sounds be part of the sound of the US and defeat defeatism that way; defeat the lack of hope by dancing and singing?’ We try all the time, we dance and sing all the time, we do our stuff all the time and it goes nowhere. There’s only the white and the black radio stations, there’s no Indian music on the radio stations. If there were, most of us would still listen to Country and Western music because we identify with that. Nonsense, why do we identify with that? Why don’t we identify with the great blues guys? That’s not even on the agenda, that’s not even given to us. We can’t even hear that on most
radios in most Indian-country, they only offer the white stuff. But, even the white stuff is a hybrid; it's a hybrid of Irish and black music and it makes it somehow speakable too much in the world, in the oppressed world. So then I go back to: what's the difference between Stan Getz and Louis Armstrong? What's the difference in the great-old blues men and people like Hoge Carinich and the white guys who cleaned up their music, ripped it off and got rich and famous?

When you listen to blacks doing black blues, you hear, whether or not you know that you're hearing it, their submerged agenda. With great celebration and with great pain; a man sings a song "My Baby Left Me" and the words don't go much beyond that. He's not allowed to say or sing in his song in those days that - my folks are being lynched and I don't have a job and I'm afraid for my life. All he can sing is "My baby left me", other words are taken away from him because he will be lynched if he sings the other words. He finds a way to put those other words in the song, in emotional and distorted ways that you can't always pinpoint, it's that guitar note, or that note - so, it's everything together. You hear it, you feel that pain and that resistance to humankind. Nor because you are taught to but because you feel it, because it's there. Not because you know the story, you feel it, you know it's there. When jazz comes along and the white guys play jazz, they play it in a kind of "formula"; then you can judge it strictly as music. You can say Take five is good. Take five is bad; this song is good, or this song needs a little... you can test it strictly aesthetically; it doesn't mean when Coltrane plays that you leave out the aesthetics, you can do exactly the same thing but you can't deny a message that Coltrane is giving through the music and I know I'm not being romantic; I know that you can feel it because you can do the same thing with Django Reinhardt.

You can say, there's something in what he is playing that's not exactly there when... he was showing us his resistance in a celebratory way.

JP: Hybrid becomes most poignant to you, it seems, when it can be emancipatory, which is a reminder that, if hybrid is simply the result of any form of exchange, then there also can be negative hybrids.

JD: Take Mexico for example. You know my line on the difference between the English and the Spanish? The Spanish saved Indian lives because all they wanted was to rape, rob and enslave and the English wanted to kill everyone and they almost did kill everyone. To Spanish saved lives by raping and enslaving and they even created more lives because they created little bastards all over Mexico. But the little bastards weren't necessarily their fathers' children, they were potentially free little bastards and could at this very moment be free at any time they choose individually. So, you can say perfectly well humans are horribly bad animals and that humans are very hopeful and miraculous things. The hope and the miraculous only come from when we resist the other side. Any spirit that might come from the hybrid state comes from the resistance to this enslaver, the rapist.

NP: That's the important thing to remember, that's the side of the model of hybridity that's completely overlooked in contemporary debates, certainly in the art world, that hybridity has a political component, or could have. Can you think of an example in the visual arts which integrate, or rather fail to connect moral and political questions into a hybrid aesthetic?

JD: I'm tired of disliking Jeff Koons because I have disliked him too much. I think his work is objectionable and I think
the way it is received is objectionable. Then I began to think it wasn't so bad when he did the sexual stuff with Ciccilina, then it began to be a little liberating because at least it was sexual! I think in general, his work from beginning to end, pretends to be threatening and people pretend to be threatened. I think he sets up straw men and people pretend that they are real men that he sets up and knocks down. Andy Warhol was personally objectionable, I didn't know him personally, but his artwork was a flyover; it wasn't like Jeff Koons: he didn't set up straw men, he set up real things to attack, he just attacked these eccentrically. You can see it in a kind of moral framework with Warhol that's not there with Koons: Jeff Koons would celebrate the fact that it's not there. Pretending to be the answer to Warhol. Koons would say, 'of course it's not there', and I would say, 'yes, see - you are being silly limmie, you are out of it': whilst they are hoping that they might be in on it.

NP: Who is the Miles Davis of the visual arts?

JD: The Miles Davis is David Hanneou because David can do such foolishly wrong things, just like Miles Davis; then, he'll do something so right that it will just blow you over like Miles Davis.

NP: He has that sure concentration?

JD: Yes and the same kind of agenda. - yes I'm black, yes I'm doing black art but not what you're talking about. Miles Davis used to say, 'I don't play jazz, I don't do your stupid jazz, I play black music.'

NP: It seems to me, if I can generalise a conclusion out of all this; the common concern, in both the political and the artistic has been to provide mechanisms that allow connections to be made for people and to transform ways of seeing things. Your work always seems to me, to be aiming towards creating a space in which histories can be told, the meaning of stories appreciated and to expand the realm of the possible.

JD: Exactly that. Yes. If I could explain what I do in Mao Tse Tung style as I often would like to do, he had a fun style and a lot of great ideas. I like that kind of dialectic bullshit. I say to myself, "would I like to talk to anyone but me? Would I like to see anyone but me? Yes - Maria Theresa. Why? Because I desire being with her and talking with her", go through it that way. Someone else, how many other people? I go through it, step by step and it ends up all the other people! 'What do I want to say to all the other people? What do they want to say to me? Why do I want all the other people to say anything to me?' I end up at the point of absurdity, To where the answer has to be - that's the way things are. There is no other way, the only other way is to say - not all the other people, just me and Maria Theresa. Then, why yer? Then I have to go back to - why me? Because I don't make any sense on my own, I don't have anything to say to you, I don't know anything at all except what I'm told.
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