

JIMMIE DURHAM

I currently live in a place that's about five paces by seven paces, and it's called the King Hotel. Which is actually bad English - it should be the King's Hotel, except maybe it means it's the king of hotels. The walls are about three millimetres thick, so that I hear everything on every side of me, and last night, just maybe two centimetres away, a couple was making love. And on the other side of me, about five paces away, another couple was making love. I was trying to sleep but I was kind of interested, and after a few minutes I said to myself, "The woman two centimetres away is faking". By the sounds, I thought she was faking. Then after a moment of listening I said, "And the man is also faking". And then I thought: why would that be true? How would he do that? Then I started listening to the other couple five paces away and I decided that they were both also faking it. And then I thought, "Roberto Pinto has rigged this. This is a performance just for me". But it wasn't.

Then I thought, "Well, it's not easy for a man to fake an orgasm", so I thought he must have been faking something else. And then it hit me what they were all faking: they weren't faking orgasms, they were faking passion. They were faking... they were just faking in general. They were having sex and maybe they were having orgasms but because they were doing that and didn't really believe it, for what reason I don't know, they were faking the passion of it, they were faking the reality of what they were doing. And as the night went on I proved to myself that this was the correct hypothesis. The couple closest to me kept it up all night till about six in the morning at different intervals. And it continued with the same strange language, the same drama, the same bad theatre. And my proof, my science - and the reason I'm telling the story is I bring it to you as a scientific report - is that if had been real passion, they could have gone to sleep and said, "Tomorrow we have all day to make love, if we like". But instead they made love because they thought they might, and because they're laying in the same bed next to each other in the dark, just like any two people might make love: it's proximation. You're laying in the bed in the dark next to this warm body and you think, "Oh, I could have sex with this warm body". It's only natural, it's biology.

I'm calling my thesis "Against Architecture," and I also mean "Against Narration," "Against Structure."

I don't think this works for a large, large building, but I like a small building like a house, for instance, that stays over time, and... Why is this box here?. After a while, when there is just a nice pure house, a tree starts growing next to it, and then the people in the house build a little garage or an outbuilding. And then the city makes a pile of stones on the street next to the house, and then someone else builds a little house kind of close to our pure house. More and more things happen. And then some more things happen: some garbage happens here, a pile of this happens, something else happens. So this little house that I'm thinking of had not even a week, not even seven days to be a pure house with its own integrity, and when it was a pure house we would not have been interested in it. But as we approach this house once it's cluttered up with all these things around it, we almost always say, or I almost always say, "What a pleasant place this looks". We don't say, "What a pleasant house this looks". The house becomes a part of something, it doesn't become invisible but it loses visibility at the same time.

It's kind of in line with that, if I had a line, that I'm not using this machine to show diapositives. A friend of mine said, "You cannot use diapositives to explain your work. It would be like if you had a building and wanted to explain it through a brick. You'd say, 'Well, my building is like this brick but expanded in several directions'".

I want to think of interruption like, not a definition of identity, but the good part of identity. I want to think of my own identity and identity in general as something completely contingent on relationships. When I try to make art I don't want to be in a studio and think about a piece of art I want to make, I want to be with a group of people not knowing what I might make. I want a discourse, not an invention.

I want to talk about an American television actress that you might not know called Vanessa Williams, and some other people you also might not have heard of. Vanessa Williams was the first black person to win the Miss America beauty contest. As you can imagine, she's a very, very light-skinned black. She was the most acceptable black woman they could find at the time. Then after she was voted in, even though she was very light-skinned, she was still a little guilty. And it turns out that some years earlier she had posed naked in Playboy magazine with another naked woman, which is really horrible in the US, to do such a thing. They took her title away from her and she was no longer Miss America.

But between that time the people who make Cornflakes breakfast cereal had put her picture on the side of the box of cereal as the new Miss America, and they had millions of these boxes of Cornflakes that they could no longer distribute, because she was a horrible person after all. So at that time a religious cultist, who was a South Korean called Sun Yun Moon, ran a cult called the Moonies. Reverend Moon wanted to make a big push on Indian reservations in the US. So Reverend Moon bought up all these boxes of Vanessa Williams Cornflakes and distributed them free on Indian reservations.

In the very early 70s a US organization called the Bureau of Indian Affairs made a deal with the government of South Africa and on every Indian reservation, or quite a few, the Bureau of Indian Affairs began taking members of the South African government on tours. At that moment the South African government was trying to make Bantustans, reservations for the blacks of South Africa. Just because the US was the country in the world with the most expertise at controlling people and putting people in compounds and making them seem to like it. So then South Africa actually made, as you know, its Bantustans, and started putting casinos on some of them, such as this monstrosity at Sun City, as a way of making the natives feel that this was a good place, a place where you could get rich. And then in the US, the American Indian Movement started making more and more trouble and it kind of looked like we might get something. The South African government kind of folded up, and they moved their casinos to the Indian reservations in the US. So practically every reservation in the US has a monstrous casino and monstrous Mafia, and a monstrous piece of... crap to deal with.

I just saw it this afternoon in an English language newspaper called Today in Milan or something like that. I should just announce what I read: There's a new English-speaking night-club, restaurant and disco in Milan, and it's run by two friendly Australians, and in the basement there's a disco with Aboriginal art on all the walls.

In my family I'm quite famous for discovering Simon & Garfunkel. They think I have secret powers in my family. Back in the early 60s the first song by Simon & Garfunkel was released on a few stations as a test, and I happened to hear it driving along in my car, but it didn't come out commercially for another year. But I told everyone in my family I had heard this nice song by a couple with a funny name, Simon & Garfunkel, so they remembered it. The next year the song was released and it became a big hit, and they thought, "He knows a lot of stuff".

But I still like Paul Simon and I liked the album "Graceland", and so does sub comandante Marcos of the state of Chiapas in Mexico. He's always listening to it and everyone knows when he's coming along in his jeep. So I was really very pleased a month ago when I saw an advertisement in a magazine for a new Broadway musical play that's going to open in January, and it's by a strange group, Paul Simon and Derek Walcott, who's a great poet, a political poet. And the guy who is the head actor in this play is an old friend of all of us, Ruben Blades. There was a time in the early 80s when we really thought that Ruben Blades would be the president of Panama. He could have been. Besides being a great musician and a nice poet we thought how neat it would be if one of our people, our crazy gang, got to be president. Wouldn't that be nice! So when I saw this advert I was actually extremely pleased because I thought these three guys were trying their best to do something new, to be in the late 90s and still participate.

But then I kept thinking day after day, because the name of this musical is "Capeman", I said to myself, "It cannot be about Salvatore Agron, who was called 'Capeman'". Salvatore Agron was a New York Puerto Rican guy who, in the 50s, became famous for throwing children off the roofs of buildings, wearing a cape as he did it. And much later I got to know him. He was put in prison for life but then he got out, and he got out in the 70s. At that time we were trying to do something - this was '77, '78, the late 70s. We were trying to make an alliance of Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Blacks, American Indians and anyone on the Left who was reasonable. We were trying to do something with the electoral system, we were trying to make a real coalition, and we called ourselves the People's Alliance. So the US government wanted to stop us and they did all sorts of dirty tricks and infiltrations. One of the things they did was to make a parallel organization which was called the New Alliance Party, as opposed to the People's Alliance. So every time we had a national meeting, these crazies, these government people would show up and cause trouble. When Salvatore Agron got out of prison the New Alliance Party took him on as though he were an oppressed Puerto Rican political activist. So suddenly this poor, demented man became a spokesperson for the Puerto Rican struggle and the group we worked with, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, had to continually tell the public, "Salvatore Agron is just a crazy guy, he doesn't represent anyone. Just because he's Puerto Rican doesn't mean anything". And "everyone" would say, "Oh, Puerto Ricans are always divisive like that".

So I said to myself, "It must be just Paul Simon just using this word 'Capeman', it can't be about Salvatore Agron". But it was, of course.

I think a lot about this great epic called "The Epic of Gilgamesh". It's from the first city in the world, so I guess it's now Iraq. Somewhere in that part of the world, anyway. I like the story because it's the story of the first city and the first writing. The first city and the first writing appeared at the same time, and the first writing was "The Epic of Gilgamesh" in this first city which is told about in this first writing. It's a very complex story and can't be easily paraphrased, but a part of it I'll paraphrase. Gilgamesh was the prince of the city. He was the son of God. God was his mother -

that's nice, isn't it? The city happened because there was a forest. Gilgamesh the prince cut down the forest, built a wall, and what was inside was the city. And then he started telling this story in writing and that's how he proved it was a city: he built a wall, he told a story in writing. He made truth, he invented a city and he invented truth at the same time. So his city is the state, not a city, it's not a cosmopolitan place, it's a state enclosure.

But like every great hero, Gilgamesh had to go on a quest, and this is the part of the story I like very much. On his quest he was instructed to always take a certain stone with him, a great big stone he had to carry with him. And then he got to a giant ocean and he said, "Well, I'm not going to take this stone". Because he had to walk along the bottom of the ocean - it was one of those kinds of quests. He almost died because he forgot to take his stone with him.

There are always, I think, two systems of writing, and in this same city, called Ur, as it was trying to become a city, a guy named Abraham said that another god told him that his people were not city people because this city was going to become bad and his people should leave the city and become nomads, they should always be traveling around. So at the same moment Gilgamesh was using writing and inventing truth, Abraham's people from the very same place were saying, "We will also invent writing and we will invent it against the state. We will use it as something subversive, we won't use it for the state but to fight the state".

I like the story of Moses so much I think it should be a separate book all on its own. But the story of Moses is really not paraphrasable because it's so complex. Do you remember why Moses wasn't allowed into the promised land? I even like the idea that he wasn't allowed in because the whole story is about him leading his people to the promised land and in the end he doesn't get to go. But one of the complexities of this Moses story as he's leading his people - sometimes leading, sometimes fighting - through the wilderness into wherever, a stone is following them. The reason Moses couldn't go into the promised land is because he struck that stone. At different times when the Hebrews were in trouble, Moses could go to this stone and say, "Stone, give us some water, we're thirsty". And the stone would give them some water. And God had told him to do that, he said, "You know, whenever you're thirsty, just go to this stone, say 'we need some water'"... So then, over years and years, Moses had had a lot of trouble, and having trouble he had to show to himself as well as to everyone else that God's spirit was with him. So right up at the moment when they were all about to go in they needed some water and Moses said, "Look, I can get water out of this stone". And he went up to the stone and hit it with his stick. I think he got some water anyway, I don't remember, but then when it came time to go into the promised land, God said, "Not you, Moses. Everyone else can go in but you stay here, because I told you, 'Don't hit it with the stick' and you hit it with the stick".

I'm sorry I reached this point because I'm about to talk about my own work in a certain way and it's going to sound like these stories are connected, but I promise you they're not connected in any way, it's just a coincidence.

I have the idea that there's something about visual art - that is, the intellectual part of visual art - that is away from language, and that its value is that it's away from language. It's a knowledge that is not connected to language. When I have some great experience with a work of art, something that I love, something like Monet's paintings or some really good stuff, the importance of it, what's moving to me, what changes me is the part that's knowledge away from language, that can't be explained in language, and it makes me feel suddenly free. Because, I think because, at least partly, I am suddenly free of this prison of words, the prison of language.

I try to make art that's not connected to metaphor, that hasn't this descriptive, metaphorical, architectural weight to it. But I think my tendency, and most artists' tendency - most artists that I know, especially, in the last 20 years - is to make instructive art, art that instructs us about something, or to make sublime art - art that says, "I'm the sensitive person, I'm your guide and you could never have seen this without me, the sensitive artist showing it to you". I think those are the two sins we now have in art, I feel that for myself.

The reason I said all that, it was a kind of filler. Because I was about to talk about my own work, as I told you, but I wanted to separate it from the Moses story. Now I'll talk about this work I'm trying to do, cuz it's about stone. It's not about what I just said. What I just said was a stop between Moses and the stones, okay? So these things don't connect.

I want to talk only about one of my works and it's the only work I want to talk about. There's a stone quarry in Sweden that has a group of stones that were made during the Second World War. It's a stone quarry in an area that's still quite poor, and they were really quite poor before the war started because they were going down. Then they got this job, this commission from Adolf Hitler, and they all took it because it was work. Maybe they didn't have a choice, but also they said, "Yeah, we will carve some stones". They didn't know whether or not - workers - "Yeah, we will carve some stones, we will do this work and we'll get paid". And sure enough, they got paid for it. Then, 60 years later I came and the stones are still there. They're beautifully hand-carved and they're immense. They're giant beyond belief. They were designed by Albert Speer, and they were intended to be a great, giant arch in Berlin. So they're beautiful stones, the work is beautiful, the history is beautiful in an ugly sort of way, and it seems a shame to just have them sitting there, doing nothing.

I already have an ongoing project of working with stone. I want to do different things with stone to make stone light, to make it free of its metaphorical weight, its architectural weight, to make it light. So I've been thinking of different ways to make stone work and to make stone move instead of making stone into an architectural element.

So my project with these stones is in two parts. One is to make - I call it a cellulose copy because I'm a little old-fashioned and I don't know what film's made of anymore. I don't think it's still made out of celluloid, is it? Is it? Yeah? I want to make a cellulose copy of the stones as I'm moving them and making them non-architectural. So it will be a moving picture about moving stones. I will take the stones from the quarry by truck to the city of Malmö in Sweden and put them on a great barge and take them towards Berlin through the Baltic Sea. And when our barge gets to a suitable place in the Baltic, it sinks - stones and barge and all - it sinks in the Baltic, and it will make a nice movie. The stones become as eternal as our film is good, and they never have to attempt to be a monument. They're free of monumentality.

And that's my entire explanation.

Q: How then do you combine discourse and the act of showing people things (which tends toward instruction or the sublime)?

Jimmie Durham: I don't know. I'd just like to recognise it as a problem. If I had something clear to say, in every case it would be so architectural that you would just forget about it

immediately. Unless I was the state, and I made it a law. I'd make it a crime and put you in prison for forgetting about it.

Q: Normally, when people move on a political level they have ideas of results in mind, so they try to move towards them. Art, on the other hand, is about ambiguity. How do you reconcile this?

JD: I'm not so sure that art is so ambiguous. I just think it's not linguistic. It's more full and complex than language - we can experience it but not explain it. If art has an aim it's usually silly. But art without politics is even sillier. Part of the problem is the normal silliness with which we think about politics and political aims. We believe in them too much. I think I'm lucky to come from a people who have lost all of our battles, even in the 60s and 70s. I imagine: suppose we had won this and that that we had asked for, what would the world be like? How would it have changed? Not much. Because what we wanted was too small, our aims had to be more intellectual. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't fight for political rights, but our demands have to be put into a larger field, larger than that of political pragmatism.

Q: But many of your works involve language as well. Aren't you exaggerating your division of art and language?

JD: I think that the greatest evil of our time is belief. So I try to interrupt every piece. So that you never would believe it. I don't think that makes it worthless. I think it gives it an importance... because I don't like belief! So I try to make the work interrupt itself and as it interrupts itself it can perfectly well begin a lot of stories and if I put some text on a piece the piece can begin to tell a story with that text, without ever making a conclusion or following a line.

Q: So how important is irony in your work?

JD: I think it's practically essential, in a certain way. Because - it sounds strange - I don't want to make cynical or pessimistic work, because that's naive. So if I want to be against instruction and belief but want to still contribute to liberation, I have to use whatever means seem human at the context. So the irony I try to use is never cynical or mocking, it's another kind of interruption.

Q: Will you have text in your film?

JD: Yes, a long text explaining the whole story.

Q: What did the Moonies do with the Cornflakes?

JD: They gave them out on Indian reservations. They also said they would give the Indians free food, etc. But they made a strategic mistake, they didn't understand the nature of colonisation. Because colonialism tends to make people quite crazy, and we, being very much colonised, are very crazy. So we didn't feel like we needed the Moonies. But everyone ate the Cornflakes.