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Jimmie Durham is a poet, performer, and visual artist. He himself describes his work as a depiction of the behaviors and norms of social interaction in different societies. In sculptures, assemblages, drawings, writings, and installations, he examines cultural behaviors, the use of nature, and his own standpoint vis-à-vis these phenomena.

At Portikus, Durham is showing a new work, an installation made of natural objects, the products of the petrification of wood. Although they look like stones, they are the results of biochemical processes. Stone is a material that plays a central role in Durham's oeuvre; he has engaged it in numerous exhibitions, performances, and videos. The exhibition room itself has been lined with carpeting and insulating foam material, lending the situation in which these "stones" appear a peculiar intensity of focus. The Portikus, Durham says, is ideally suited to creating this particular situation: "I knew that one could do something highly concentrated. I bought the beautiful strange stones in Berlin, because I could not resist them ..." Durham decided to admit no more than a single visitor to the room at any time to enable a mood of silence and utmost concentration to emerge. As Durham further remarks, "Then I had to think what to do with them that would not seem a desecration or



either too simplistic, so I thought that making people experience them without jabber, without comparisons, without distractions ... One person at a time; no matter how theatrical or impractical that might turn out ...” As an additional element in the show, the visitor can read a poem written by Jimmy Durham himself: “I wanted the most thoughtful, meditative piece [...]; even though it is also highly theatrical in a certain sense; and might add a necessary weight to the stones ... I decided to be willing, as one must with poetry, to be confessional.”

Born to Cherokee parents in the U.S. in 1940, Jimmie Durham first emerged as an artist and writer during the 1960s. Having graduated from the École des Beaux-Arts, Geneva, in 1972, he first devoted himself entirely to political work with the American Indian Movement. He was a co-founder and director of the International Indian Treaty Council and its representative to the United Nations, where his work led to the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People.

Besides essayistic and literary writings, Jimmie Durham has focused on creating a visual language for his art, which often describes the interrelation between architecture, monumentality, and history. In his anti-architecture performances and videos, for example, he tries to free the stone, the privileged material of architecture, from its metaphorical association with magnificence, stability, and durability. He uses stone to crush cars, demolish refrigerators, or squeeze paint from tubes. In his writings, he examines the vocabulary that is used to talk about art and other matters. The result is a critical reflection that takes stock also of its own entanglements.

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Curated by: Melanie Ohnemus
Photos: Katrin Schilling

