

Cornelia Parker: Personal Investigation

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Cornelia Parker: Personal Investigation

Introduction

During this personal investigation I propose to explore and present an '*exploded view*' of Cornelia Parker's life and works of space, suspension, friction and destruction.

I intend to explore the suppressed ideas and images behind her installations, the significance it represents in today's society, and unravel the subconscious thoughts of her works such as: '*Colder Darker Matter*' and '*The Maybe*'. (Which are connected, support and are influential my Alevel art projects, but also have caused most media attention within the art world).

Within my conclusion I hope to evaluate the influence of her works, and the understanding and developments of the themes and ideas behind them.

Personal History

Artists Name: Cornelia Parker

Date of Birth: 1956

Recognised Work:

Subconscious of a Monument (2003)
Blue Shift (2001)
At the Bottom of this Lake Lies a Piece of the Moon (2000)
Edge of England (1999)
Mass (Colder Darker Matter) (1997)
Wedding Ring Drawing (1997)
The Maybe (1995)
Cold Dark Matter: *An Exploded View* (1991)
Matter and What it Means (1989)
Thirty Pieces of Silver (1988)

Awards:

Best Show by an Emerging Artist, International Association of Art Critics Prize, for
Mass: Colder Darker Matter at Deitch Projects (1998)
Short-listed for the Turner Prize for '*Mass: Colder Darker Matter*' (1997)
Southern Arts Award (1983)
First Prize '*Midland View*', Stoke City Art Gallery (1980)

Exhibitions (from 1980 to 2003)

2003 Guy Bartschi, Geneva, Switzerland, D'Amelio Terras, New York, NY
2002 Frith Street Gallery, London
2001 Galleria Civica D'Arte Moderna, Italy
2000 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
1999 Frith Street Gallery, London and the London Science Museum
1998 Serpentine Gallery, London and Deitch Projects, New York
1997 ArtPace, San Antonio Italy
1996 Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff
1995 Serpentine Gallery, London, '*The Maybe*' and the Gallery 102 Germany
1992 Galerie Eigen + Art, Germany and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London
1991 Chisenhale Gallery and the Spitalfields Heritage Centre, London
1989 Cornerhouse, Manchester
1988 Ikon Gallery, Birmingham
1980 Stoke City Art Gallery and Museum, Stoke City

In the Beginning

Cornelia Parker was born in Cheshire in 1956, the second of three sisters; she obtained a working class background from an early age. However a school trip to the *London Tate Gallery* at the age of 15, confirmed Cornelia desired to be an artist

After studying foundation art in 1975 at *Gloucestershire College of Art and Design* and continuing her studying to B.A. Honours, at *Wolverhampton Polytechnic* in 1978, Cornelia turned her hand to abstract sculpture. Inspired by the 'Arte Povera' movement in Italy, (which rejected traditional marble and bronze but used any materials they chose), she formed a passion for contemporary structural art, provoking the foundations of her life's work in sculpture.

Unfortunately, despite her passion for sculpting, having avoid basic courses in sculpture and carving at college, she learned her work was technically flawed. Conversely exploiting her weaknesses to their full potential, she commenced in exploring the "liberating" topics of destruction and friction within world social issues, which made a perceptible impact on her work.

During 1982 Parker obtained a M.F.A., at *Reading University*, developing her own styles and techniques, often by using materials which had often been subjected to violent acts of transformation. She moved to a small London art studio in 1984, and began to suspend things from the ceiling '...because there wasn't any space on the floor...' her lack of an art studio became a catalyst for her 1980s work of space and suspension.

Parker's Work and Career

In 1988 Parker first came to public attention, for her renowned "*Thirty Pieces of Silver*" by arranging a steamroller to level a scavenged collection over a thousand flattened silver objects, including plates, spoons, candlesticks, cigarette cases, teapots and trombones; to create the raw materials for a large-scale sculpture. In reference to the biblical story of the apostle Judas Iscariot betraying Jesus in return for 'thirty pieces of silver', Parker has altered the silver's meaning, visibility and its worth, and by flattening them she has consigned them all to the same fate. In the gallery the ruined objects are ghostly levitating just above the floor, waiting to be reassessed in the light of their transformation. The pieces of silver have much more potential when their meaning as everyday objects has been eroded; these reflections allude to the images of money, betrayal, death and resurrection.

On development of her suspension work, in 1991 Parker established '*Cold Dark Matter: An exploded view*' which was an ordinary garden shed, blown up by the British Army. Parker collected the wreckage reassembling it as a constellation of suspended garments, surrounding a light bulb; portraying a powerful image of destruction and distillation.

Parker then became a '*Senior Fellow in Fine Art*' at the Cardiff Institute, London in 1992. However after a car accident in 1994 Cornelia began to realise the importance of preserving her work, and began the process of being represented by the Frith Street Gallery.

In 1995 came to public prominence with her collaboration with performer Tilda Swinton on '*The Maybe*' at the Serpentine Gallery, focusing on the impressions that one has when confronted with the belongings of historic figures. Parker selected curiosities from various museums, including Turner's watercolour box, Queen Victoria's stockings and Sigmund Freud's blanket, in order to elicit free associations from the beholder. Swinton was presented sleeping in a glass vitrine surrounded by the items. Parker's aim was not merely to question the power of relics, but also to create a mental route that triggers unexpected associations. (See '*Cornelia Parker's Work*' for further details)

In 1997 Parker was nominated for the Turner Prize, presented at the Tate Gallery London, for her an installation piece '*Mass (Colder Darker Matter)*' constructed from the representation of the charred remains of a wooden Texas Church that was struck by lightning, reassembled and suspended from the ceiling. (See '*Cornelia Parker's Work*' for further details) Interested in the invisible, the unquantifiable (that is, the exact definition of the scientific term 'cold dark matter'), Parker worked not only with the altered scale and substance of things, but also with the meaning conveyed by found objects.

In 1998 Parker presented a major solo exhibition at *The Serpentine Gallery*, London, and became '*Artist in Residence*' at the Science Museum, London between 1998-1999; also obtaining in 2000 a Honorary Doctorate in Art at *University of Wolverhampton*.

Since then melting, slicing, crushing, shooting, and exploding objects and recycling the results into movingly arranged installations, which has become the trademark of Parker's creative progression. She continues to be a conceptual artist working on projects and exhibitions; and lives in London.

Cornelia Parker's Creations

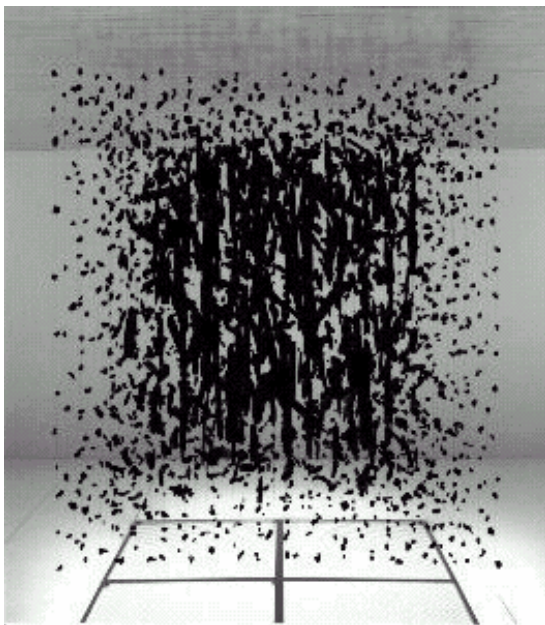
Introduction

Within this section of the investigation I am reviewing two main pieces most inspirational influential and supportive within my art projects: '*Mass (Colder Darker Matter)*' and '*The Maybe*'. Parker's metaphors of destruction and friction, are issues I can relate personally to in my own work, and have been influential of my final pieces within my first project of '*Cabinets of Curiosity*'.

Mass (Colder Darker Matter) 1997

Background Knowledge

Mass (Colder Darker Matter) is a large installation constructed from the cubic suspension of charcoal remains, (and then hanging the scorched and mutilated fragments) of a Texas Baptist Church, struck and burnt down by lightning. Presented as her featured work in the 1997 Turner Prize Exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London, '*Mass (Colder Darker Matter)*' has now made its permanent home, at the Phoenix Art Museum, New York.



Mass (Colder Darker Matter) (1997) as viewed at its Turner Prize Exhibition, at the Tate Gallery, London



While on view, *Mass (Colder Darker Matter)* attracted critical praise and rendered visitors awe-struck. It represents the culmination of Parker's decade-long practice of installation art exploring destruction, transformation and the properties of matter, an extension of her 1991 piece, '*Cold Dark Matter: An exploded View*'. When exhibited in New York in 1998, the installation received "*Best in Show by an Emerging Artist*" by the International Association of Art Critics.

Experimentation

In experimenting within Parker's visions of destruction and transformation, I have concluded to display this personal investigation within an obliterated charcoal book, connected within symbolic references to 'Colder Darker Matter', by setting the front and back covers alight with a gas lamp (instead of setting it alight by lightening!).

This expressed the idea of me '*Playing as God*', causing the book to part from its relevant meaning within society and its everyday use of familiarity and potential security of containing exclusive information. By manipulating every atom within seconds of burning, I formed a new relevance to the book of coldness, death and isolation, a place of terror within its pages.

These are the themes situated throughout Parker's dominating and powerful imagery within '*Colder Darker Matter*'; the physical attributes of my piece in comparison to Parker's is the charcoal effect obtained by burning the book, and its '*natural colour*'.

Review of 'Mass (Colder Darker Matter)'

In reviewing this installation, I believe '*Colder Darker Matter*' demonstrates the juxtaposition of contrasting images between the sentiment of religion and the commotion of lighting, which is distilled into a motionless and silent piece only by suspending the blackened fragments which flesh out a three-dimensional form.

Parker uses the word '*Mass*' in the work's title not only to allude the mystery of religion and faith, but of destruction and resurrection. '*Cold Dark Matter*' however refers to a contrasting scientific term, used to describe the substance that exists in the universe, yet remains mysterious and "*unquantifiable*".

By arranging the larger pieces inside the centre of the composition and the smaller elements to emerge, Parker generates the semblance of a cube suspended within time and space, evoking the chilling sensations of silence within its quiescent state. The fragments are frozen, in a permanent condition of suspended flux, generating endless ideas of the physical and spiritual acts of resurrection; expressing the emotions between confliction of horror, death, divinity and beauty.

The installation has a flat, illustrative quality when viewed from the front like an abstract black and white painting; alternatively viewed from an angle, the square form becomes apparent, giving the work the paradoxical and haunting aspect of both a solid and an empty space. Within this piece Parker collides opposites: the forces of nature and mankind, fragments disintegrating and the resurrecting of particles, death and life; it is evident this piece is her personal representation of how friction within humanity occurs and sustains dominantly within society.

To formulate this piece, Parker has used an indirect yet decisive formation process, in the course of transformation, to an evocative installation of shattered charcoal fragments, which carries many symbolic overtones. The wooden church's radical change of being burnt, to small charcoal fragments however does not mark a sacrilegious end, but I believe the beginning of its transformation in which meaning is found in its subsequent suspended state.

The Maybe (1995)

Background Knowledge

Back in 1995, *The Maybe* made front page news as thousands flocked to see Parker's performance art collaboration with actress Tilda Swinton held at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Swinton was induced to sleep in a glass vitrine (during exhibition hours) for a week; whilst lying amongst other cases containing ostensibly ordinary physical objects, rendered extraordinary by their historical and human associations. These objects ranged from Charles Babbage's brain, a blanket and pillow from Freud's couch, to a fragment of Lindbergh's aircraft in which he crossed the Atlantic in 1927. After its success in London, Swinton was invited to recreate the piece in Rome, Japan and Russia.

Review of 'The Maybe' (1995)

In reviewing *The Maybe*, this piece inflicts imposing imagery on the viewer, such as the regenerative powers of nature, the power of the subconscious and the metamorphosis of the human body combined with the essence of mortality.

These introspective themes are conveyed by the memory-laden objects which surround Swinton; these artefacts take on the overpowering role of relics which heightens its emphasise of the absence/death of their one-time owners. Consequently in a disturbing contrast Tilda Swinton is alive, present in body; yet strangely and distinctly absent as she lays in an unconscious sleep, potentially regenerating and restoring life to these unnatural and desolate objects.

Despite Swinton's body being eminently still and inanimate Parker has positioned her in an overwhelmingly direct manner, which is influential in provoking the viewer to linger in anticipation, hoping for the simplest of involuntary responses; an affirmation to their act of watching. Perhaps Swinton's quiescent state caused an ambience of rejection and uncertainty throughout the audience, due to the *'addiction'* of staring at the breathing yet lifeless figure? This indirect stimulation imaginably tormented the *active viewers' minds*, to expose a source of movement compared to the *inert unconscious mind* of Swinton; a theme of the powers of Swinton's subconscious mind over her

watchful audience. The silence and passivity of this piece gives every minute detail and theme an immense power, an intensity of effect.

Cornelia Parker's creation: *'The Maybe'* shares a strong affinity with the works of American-born artist Susan Hiller, whom directly employs processes related to the subconscious mind, including dreaming, memory, automatic writing and improvised vocalisations, similar and shared themes emitted from *'The Maybe'*.

Susan Hiller's work has been recognised in major exhibitions internationally, most notably at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool. After practising anthropology and archaeology in the United States, Hiller has worked as an artist in London since 1973.

A strong theme situated in this performance piece, is a fundamental topic within Hiller's works: revealing aspects of human experiences which, although charged with significance, are often concealed. In the case of *'The Maybe'*, Parker uses intimate and significant *'fragments'* of people's lives, and situates these objects for all to scrutinise and view within a glass case. However their relevant meanings are accentuated by Swinton's presence in the same confinement.

Death, desire and language are also other major themes within Hiller's work,

which evokes the uncanny, suppressed aspects of our collective cultural production.

Sensitive to both the possibilities and the limitations of all artistic media, Hiller has never confined herself to any one in particular. Involving writing, painting, performance, photography, video, projections, her work entails the investigation of the overlooked significance of ordinary cultural objects such as postcards, domestic wallpapers, television fantasies, children's' games and ghost stories, which she uses as basic materials.

who like Parker shares her fascination with process and habit of collecting.

In a certain sense art and science explore the nature of consciousness, its evolution and transformation. Works of art change the consciousness of those who see them, and in turn, this change of consciousness permeates society in general.

The group also enquired how far consciousness extends - into the body, into society as a whole, into nature and right down to the elementary particles and space-time itself?

Conclusions

Within this project I have developed my understanding of the hidden meanings and symbolism behind the expansion of Cornelia's installation art, furthermore I have understood the representation of the processes of transformation of the 'ordinary' artefacts she has collected, by her illustrative methods of destruction and alteration.

The modifications of these selected objects attach the representation of pain, friction and death; Parker recycles these results into movingly arranged installations, that when the illustrative images are combined they emphasise '*chilling*' juxtaposition meanings such as beauty and horror.

I have also observed the subtle influences exerted by the developments of new media within Parker's work, such as photography, digital art, and interactive installations, which cause the significance behind Parker's pieces to achieve new meanings, or enhance the images of the piece.

Cornelia Parker: sculptress, satirist, cultural anthropologist, mad scientist, criminologist, and alchemist has a renowned gift for making the unnoticed pieces of life relevant and visually compelling. As an artist, she conducts her own singular experiments into the particles, fragments, and scraps that make up our world.

Within her work, she conducts her own singular experiments into the physical properties of substances, within issues and materials, playing on their public and private symbolic meaning, revealing the points of friction, confliction between opposites, destruction and resurrection to its unrefined minimum. Sometimes the act of transformation is spectacularly destructive, as when she flattened a pile of silver plate with a steamroller. At other times, in her photograms of feathers for instance, it is gentle and fugitive. Parker rearranges the physical world on her own singular terms, finding poetry in the most prosaic of objects.

Parker's works achieve the meaning of '*changing the definition of sculpture*' where she obliterates an object's original three-dimensional form to a point where each single atom it consists of, almost loses its primitive reference. Thereby playing with the idea of a three-dimensional form existing in the space within our minds as opposed to objects that are before us; I think this is a very radical reposition of the medium.

It is evident, that within Parker's hands, nothing is secure. Solid objects collapse, collide, combust and are crushed, only to remerge in unusual and surprising forms. In her world, matter is entirely malleable to her command; physical properties are there to be tested. Her approach is at the same time scientific and poetic, yet she is linguistically and symbolically playful. Her later works is palpable of Parker's ability to find a deep sense of meaning and mystery in the most unsuspecting corners of our physical surroundings.

Demonstrated in more than sixty sculptures, photographs, drawings, and objects ranging from teapots and wedding bands to feathers have become transformed into metaphorically rich artefacts invoking royal history, literature, religion, and the paranormal.

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