The traces of indexical action in the work of Cornelia Parker

Introduction

**Cornelia Parker** is a London-based sculptor and installation artist. She was born during the year 1956 in Cheshire, England. She was raised on a Cheshire smallholding. Cornelia Parker's work is regarded internationally for its complex, darkly humorous, ironic style. Cornelia Parker's work is highly allusive and patterned with cultural references to cartoons, a style which she adapts to her need to capture things in the moment before they slip away and are lost beyond human perception. When examining her work holistically one can see the following themes driving her work forward consumerism, globalization, and the role of the mass media in contemporary life. Cornelia Parker was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1997 and featured in the 8th International Sharjah Biennial in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates in 2007.

Cornelia Parker, sculptor and installation artist intensified her campaign against disused silver a few years later when she crushed hundreds of plated items with a steamroller. She has also flattened thousands of coins under the wheels of passing trains, plucked feathers from Sigmund Freud’s pillow and blown up garden sheds with plastic explosive. The results of these depredations have been hung in art galleries where they have received high praise from public and critics alike. Her collaboration with the actress Tilda Swinton, ‘The Maybe’ at the Serpentine Gallery, was the focus of excited national attention for its display of Swinton, surrounded by objects selected by Parker, sleeping throughout the day in a glass case. In November 1996 Parker mounted a solo show called ‘Avoided Object’ at Chapter Art Gallery in Cardiff. Word of mouth was infectious and the show attracted scouts from London.

Avoided Object is the title of series of smaller works which have been developed in liaison with various institutions, including the Rayal Armouries and Madame Tussauds. These “avoided” objects have often had their identities transformed by being burned, shot, squashed, stretched, drawn, exploded, cut, or simply dropped off cliffs. Cartoon deaths have long held a fascination for Parker: ‘Tom being run over by a steamroller or Jerry riddled with bullet holes. Sometimes the objects demise has been orchestrated, or it may have occurred accidentally or by natural causes. They might be “preempted” objects that have not yet achieved a fully formed identity, having been plucked prematurely from the production line like Embryo Firearms 1995. They may not even be classified as objects: things like cracks, creases, shadows, dust or dirt The Negative of Whispers 1997: Earplugs made with fluff gathered in the Whispering Gallery, St Paul’s cathedral .Or they might be those territories you want to avoid psychologically, such as the backs, underbellies or tarnished surfaces of things.’

Cornelia Parker uses processes of destruction to transform found objects. She steamrolled, explodes, degrade and turn poisonous, and presents the remains of the object. She collects tarnish, dust, stains, and traces of the object as an archive may store the trace or residue of an event. How is memory attached to the object, does it become unstuck during the process? Does the object continue to embody its past in its morphed and rearranged construction? And how is this past still present, through the viewers’ projection of their readings, through clues given in the ‘found’ titles of the artwork? Of the collected silverware, all with different stories, Parker says she wanted to ‘give them one story’, by flattening them with a steamroller.

Parker seems to also enjoy the unexpected stories when the reader projects something new onto the artwork or interesting things are discovered within the ‘blow up’. For example, she was asked by a curator at the Tate if the Pornographic prints were made by a human body, which is the curator reading into the Rorschach inkblots. Einstein’s formulae on a blackboard, when photographed under a microscope resemble ‘sea creatures’, Parker suggests nature under the mathematics. She also photographs under a microscope dust collected from Donald Judd’s work, and describes the emerging imagery as ‘Gothic’.

Parker is talking art history in her East End flat, standing beside a humming slide projector. Her slightly stooped stance reminds us that tall women are politer than tall men. They succumb to the wearisome need to bend down towards their lesser interlocutors. As she speaks one realizes that her face is rarely in repose her delivery is rapid, nervously energized, its content a dense mixture of anecdote and analysis. The vigor of her commentary is directly reflected in her work, which proliferates in an apparently unbroken stream much like the awesome eruptions that inspire it. She is talking about her enchantment with the exploded view. “You could just about visualize what the original object was,” she explains, “but I started thinking how all the fragments might reform to make completely new objects with new uses.” These speculations eventually evolved into the ideas that have so fruitfully driven Parker to make art.

In 1991 she took her preoccupation with the metaphysics of explosions to an extreme that marked a breakthrough in her work. Parker filled a garden shed with tools, a lawnmower, a bicycle, books and toys, all culled from the artist’s trove of orphaned objects that is the British car boot sale. The shed was installed and photographed in the Chisenhale Gallery in London’s East End, then dismantled and transported to the British Army School of Ammunition at Kineton. Lieutenant Colonel Joe Hastings and Major Dougie Hewitt applied sticks of pale marzipan explosive to the interior of the shed and blew it to pieces. For several hours squad dies and a delighted Parker combed the area, picking up every single shard and sliver, every shred of the shrapnel of the mower and the mangled mass of bent bike.

A few days later an eerie and exquisite sculpture, ‘Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View’, was unveiled in the stark concrete space of the Chisen-hale Gallery. Parker had painstakingly reassembled the shed and its shattered contents, suspending each tiny blasted scrap from a filament of wire and illuminating the whole with a single bare white bulb placed at the epicenter. The shed had been frozen in space a millisecond after its disintegration; only the bang is missing, rather like the cold, dark matter that astronomers say makes up the weight of the Universe.

The business of finding new currency for old and familiar objects has led the indefatigable Parker down some exotic pathways. Her ‘Thirty Pieces of Silver’ also featured an act of great violence followed by a display of surpassing beauty. Turning again to the cornucopia of the car boot, the artist collected hundreds of old silver and silver-plated tea-pots, candle-sticks, toast-racks, salvers and the odd trombone. The tarnished tat, displaced from numberless mantelpieces, was laid out on the ground in a long, gently curving line and slowly crushed by a steamroller. After the grinding and clanking had subsided, Parker picked up the pieces.

The YBAs [Young British Artists], supposedly typified by Damien Hirst, have become inseparable from the controversy staged around their work and Parker is frequently written about as if she were part of the gang. A distinction that generally escapes her commentators is that at the age of 41 she has, in fact, quite happily relinquished the ‘Y’ part of the sobriquet. She graduated from the Fine Arts course at Reading University in 1982 and has been steadily mounting exhibitions in the art capitals of the world ever since. Given that there’s no proper money in art unless you’re up there with Damien, Parker lives off a succession of commissions, awards and residencies, whilst renting a modest shared flat in Shoreditch. At the time of writing she was rather looking forward to seeing her newish partner, a Texan artist on the point of visiting London.

The work that so impressed the Turner Prize selectors saw Parker working on a much smaller scale than that of her shed and steamroller period. ‘The Cardiff show,” she says, “had lots of little residues of objects that are all quite slight but together add up to something solid.” The ‘avoided objects’ speak of their role in a process which has made them seem redundant. “They’re about things that have lost their life or not yet got a life.” As an example, she cites ‘The Negative of Sound’, a framed assemblage of strands of black lacquer, the swarf discarded from the ‘master’ of a record first cut in Abbey Road Studios. “The idea of the negative of sound, for me, is fantastic. How can you listen to it? What does it sound like? What kind of instrument would you have to have to play them on?”

Avoided objects can also be ex-objects. For ‘Exhaled Cocaine’ Parker persuaded Customs & Excise to give her the ashes of seized, incinerated cocaine, presented by the artist as an end product ‘breathed out’ by a crucial process in its history. This poetic recycling of residue is also seen in a piece whose title would, quite wrongly, lead overheated British journalists to believe their usual suspicions were justified. ‘Pornographic Drawings’ is the fruit of another successful transaction with Customs & Excise. “They’re Rorschach blots made from confiscated pornography. The video tape was chopped up into tiny pieces, to get rid of it, and they gave me a big bag full. I wanted to recreate images from things that had been taken out of circulation, so I made an ink out of it. Most of them did turn out to be quite pornographic, but if you think they are, that’s you projecting because they’re only accidental ink blots.”

Parker’s attention is directed always at the ignored, undervalued and forgotten. She pushes quizzically at the surface of the everyday until its objects reveal their hidden histories. These stories reveal in turn that much of what we take for granted is immersed in the streams of memory and myth that carry meaning into our lives. Galleries are not the only site in which she has placed her provocations. Forests, railway stations and bell towers have been requisitioned, sometimes for purposes of display, sometimes as places of concealment that may be chanced upon by the unsuspecting. Despite the many forms it takes, Parker’s art has an impressive internal consistency. All her work stems from a wittily philosophical consideration of the processes that bring everyday objects into being. She feels that this preoccupation, in turn, was partly brought into being by a curious event that took place in1961.

Even if, she did not win the Turner Prize, many of her Avoided Objects will be seen by the thousands who visit the Tate for the six week show featuring the work of all the nominees. In addition to the works described, visitors will see her embryo guns, the feather from Freud’s pillow, a magnified photo of the grooves of a record owned by Hitler and several other evidences of a refined and ingenious sensibility. Pressed to speculate on her prize-winning chances, the artist is characteristically modest. “Oh, it’ll just be great to be shown in the Tate” is the most she’ll say. Were Parker to pull it off, however, her power to realize some of her more ambitious projects would be considerably enhanced. NASA, for example, would be bound to send a meteorite back into space for her and she might, at long last, be able to persuade Stanley Kubrick to part with a sample of his navel fluff. A few weeks ago Parker was nominated for the prestigious Turner Prize.

Reference:

‘Avoided Object’ (2007), Lecture by Cornelia Parker at the Bartlett January. London.