

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: CORNELIA PARKER

Cornelia Parker

Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View

18 September - 27 October 1991

September 2016 marks 25 years since Cornelia Parker's ground-breaking exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991). To celebrate this anniversary, Parker has generously produced a new limited edition artwork, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View. A work in progress* (2016). All proceeds contribute to Chisenhale Gallery's artistic programme, supporting the next generation of pioneering artists.

As part of the *Chisenhale Interviews* series, Chisenhale Gallery Director Polly Staple interviewed Parker about the historic show and its location within her practice. The interview took place at Parker's home in London on 25 August 2016.

Polly Staple: *To start at the beginning, how did the Chisenhale Gallery exhibition come about?*

Cornelia Parker: I first met Jonathan Watkins when he moved to London in 1986, at Richard Wilson's birthday dinner, which was the day after Jonathan arrived. Five years later, Jonathan applied for the Director position at Chisenhale. By that time, we had established a pretty good friendship and he told me that he was going to go for the job and asked whether, if he was offered the post, I would do one of his early shows. That was how the Chisenhale commission came about.

PS: *How did your thinking about Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View develop?*

CP: I was working with ideas about objects meeting tragic ends and then being resurrected. For *Thirty Pieces of Silver* (1988-9) I had used a steamroller to flatten a collection of silver plated items. The following year, I produced *Object That Fell off the White Cliffs of Dover* (1992) and the installation *Neither From Nor Towards* (1992).

Because Chisenhale Gallery is essentially a black box without any natural light, I decided to make the work around a single light bulb, which was both physically and conceptually central to the piece. The explosion would provide the flash of light, the Big Bang moment. The idea of the explosion was there from the beginning.

Jonathan had just laid a new concrete floor in the gallery and I asked him whether I could explode something inside the space and, surprisingly, he agreed! But of course, that would have been ridiculous, not least because of the artists' studios above.

The question then became what was I going to blow up? At that time, I lived in Leytonstone in a row of houses that all had sheds at the ends of their gardens. The typical garden shed harbours a reservoir of stuff, a collection of things that you don't want to throw away, like the attic. There is often a reluctance to let things go, I am interested in how this might serve as a metaphor for psychological baggage.

Once I had decided to use a shed, I started to ask friends up and down the street whether they could donate things from their own garden sheds. The record player, the wellington boot and the umbrella are all things that were donated. It was a good excuse to the visit huge weekly car boot sale in Walthamstow, where people were selling their unwanted possessions.

PS: Did you build the shed specially or was there a pre-existing shed?

CP: I didn't want a brand new shed or an old one plucked from someone's allotment or garden – that would have been too biographical and specific to one individual. Instead, I used wood that was salvaged from a number of old sheds, working with builders who created a composite especially for the piece. By fusing together different timbers from multiple sheds, it became a collective idea of what a shed might be.

PS: The complete shed was photographed inside the gallery first. Why did you decide to do that?

CP: I've always loved the idea of the before and after, and the photograph of the complete shed presents the 'before' moment. The photograph was exhibited in the entrance, just as visitors came down the ramp into the main gallery. Then when they walked around the corner and saw the installation they could make that connection.

The image of the complete shed also cements the idea that the illuminated light bulb is the centre of the piece. In both the pre-exploded and the exploded shed, the light is in the centre of the work. The light bulb was actually on a dimmer, so you could adjust the brightness or darkness of the piece.

PS: How did you negotiate having the shed exploded? Did someone write a letter to the British Army?

CP: Jonathan Watkins phoned up the PR person at the British Army and, as always, was very charming. He was the one who managed to persuade them. Then we went out to the Army School of Ammunition in Banbury for a meeting. We thought we were going to plead our case but really they wanted to show us how they could blow things up. As a demonstration of their skills they blew up a car and cut a table in half with a line of explosive wire. I think they enjoyed having an excuse to blow things up. It was a very fun day.

PS: After you saw their tests did you drive the shed out to Banbury with all its contents and assemble it there?

CP: Yes, exactly. Then we blew it up with a large amount of Semtex. Because the explosive was packed in the middle of it and it was quite a full shed, things disappeared when it exploded. Some pieces ended up miles away. Afterwards, we drove all the pieces we could find back to London in a van.

PS: The photographs from that day are great, particularly of you looking like a Land Girl with the soldiers. Did Hugo Glendinning take those?

CP: Yes, Hugo covered the whole thing. There was one photograph – or perhaps it's not a photograph, it's just a memory – of Hugo with his great big telephoto lens, strutting around, mirroring the soldiers with their guns. It was a testosterone filled occasion, with a lot of risqué jokes and camaraderie.

PS: In addition to Jonathan, Hugo and you, there is another woman in some of the photographs, who else joined you that day?

CP: We were joined by dancer Gaby Agis. She later created a piece of choreography based on *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* for the Dance Umbrella, which was performed at Chisenhale during the show. They danced with and around the exploded shed. At one point, they rolled underneath it, which was rather terrifying.

PS: When you came back to Chisenhale and you were assembling the work, did you already have a sense of exactly how you wanted it to look or was it a piece by piece process?

CP: It was piece by piece, which is the way I normally work. I might have a central concept but the structure takes shape intuitively and very quickly. It is driven by the moment and a very spontaneous response to the material, the light and the space,

PS: It was hung from wires. Were these attached to the ceiling of the gallery directly or was there a frame?

CP: There were pieces of re-cycled mesh that we put up as we needed. If there was an odd stray piece that floated out from the mesh, we drilled individual holes. Later it was formalised to five metres square when it went into the Tate collection.

PS: When the piece is re-presented, I imagine there is a complex installation plan – or does it shift slightly each time?

CP: All of the elements are on wires and they have hooks and you can move them around by eye. The general rule is that the smallest fragments sit closest to the light bulb, the medium-sized elements surround them, and then the largest pieces, and finally the pieces of wood encircle the outside. This formation is intended to make it as dynamic as possible.

There are certain objects that work nearer the light bulb, such as the heroic (but charred) Spiderman that has been blown apart and the blackened Spitting Image puppet of the queen with its tragicomic quality. There's even a crumpled can of Coca Cola that a member of the army was drinking on the day.

I thought that the amount of debris around the light bulb would make it a very dark piece, but instead the dramatic shadows amplified and recreated the explosion. Having such a big space at Chisenhale Gallery was great because you got this massive shadow play. Even the viewers' shadows became part of the work.

PS: There is a drama to it. Were you interested in theatre at that time?

CP: While I was working on *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, I was going out with an actor from the Royal Shakespeare Company and I had several friends who were involved in theatre, dance and film. After my fine art BA, aged 21, I did a residency at Crewe & Alsager College in Cheshire where they had the first combined honours degree in the arts. Students could, for example, study writing and painting or sculpture and drama. I spent 18 months at the college as their artist in residence, extending my practise and comfort zone. One minute I was designing a set for *Waiting for Godot*, the next I was making pieces of sculpture to be worn on stage. It was a Bauhaus-like environment, very liberating.

In the eighties, experimental theatre in Britain was fantastic, all performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA). I was there all the time, absorbing everything they had on offer. I had close friends who were members of Impact Theatre company, including Heather Ackroyd and Graeme Miller. They made dramatic stage shows that were conceptual and lean, almost filmic rather than theatrical. I went on tour with them to Spain as an unofficial member of their crew.

I'm drawn to visual analogy, especially those that appear in old children's encyclopaedias. These feature pictorial scenarios to describe complex ideas, such as physiological systems or disease, for example: to explain the concept of white blood cells (white clad soldiers) fighting off bacteria (black clad soldiers). I'm fascinated by graphic representations of good and evil. I am particularly interested in cartoon deaths where Tom and Jerry are shot full of holes or blown apart and then reconstituted; Road Runner runs off a cliff or is steamrollered.

PS: Were you interested in cartoons from an early age?

CP: I lived in the country and we didn't watch too much TV but there were certain things that my parents would allow me to watch, like Tom and Jerry, Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. I have watched those since childhood and I still refer to them now.

PS: When did you become interested in sculpture? Was this an aspect of your practice that you developed at art school?

CP: I was at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in the mid-seventies and I was making work that was influenced by Bruce Nauman's capturing of negative space, like in his piece *Space Under My Hand As I Write My Name* (1966). I was pouring plaster underneath floorboards in derelict houses and casting spaces where objects had been taken away.

PS: Were you introduced to Donald Judd and the minimalists at art school?

CP: No, we weren't taught about Judd or minimalism, or art history. Dick Hebdige was a lecturer there. He taught us about subculture and how to read photography. He discussed film with us: Eisenstein, Tarkovsky and others. I absorbed myself in all of that.

At art school I gradually became aware of Arte Povera and Marcel Duchamp. They weren't taught to me directly but I developed an interest in them and they began to inform my work. I would go to the library and look at art magazines.

PS: How did your approach to sculpture evolve after you left art school?

I started making work at home in Leytonstone. I made a conscious decision to use representational objects and push them to the point of abstraction rather than making abstract forms that hinted at representation. It was a deliberate inversion of what I had done before. When I visited New York in 1984 I brought back a souvenir model of the Empire State Building and cast it in lead in my kitchen, over and over in the same mould until it became abstracted. In *Falling Towers, Sinking Ships* (1984) I hung these abstracted Empire State Buildings upside down on metal wires, creating plumb lines.

I first experimented with suspension at art school, but true suspension started to happen when I was working at home because the largest expanse of available space was the ceiling.

Similarly, working at home prompted me to use representational objects, items that everybody recognises. In this way, working at home made the work less 'art'.

PS: Which year was that?

CP: From 1984 onwards I was working at home. I had five years each in two separate flats in Leytonstone. The first was through a housing co-op and Acme Housing provided the second. In those days, Acme went into areas where there was going to be a road built or something similar, and they would take over short-term leases on houses that were destined for demolition. I moved into an Acme flat on my own after having lived with other people for years. I had my studio in a spare room, which was where I conceived the exploded shed.

PS: Was not having a separate studio an economic decision or did you simply not need it?

CP: Economic, yes, but somehow it liberated me. I actually started to make bigger and bigger work through not having a proper studio. I was making site-specific work, often ephemeral, which meant that it was made on location and remained where it was until it fell apart. Or I was creating installations from scratch in the gallery. In a studio I find I can prevaricate forever and think of a thousand ways of making a piece of work, which wastes time. I find it is better to work under intense pressure and for my intuition and subconscious to dictate. This means that the work becomes more pared down. I find work made in the studio could be too elaborate, whereas work made on site achieves an economy of means.

PS: To continue with this idea of economies of means, how did you support yourself financially? Were you represented by a gallery?

CP: I was finally offered representation by a gallery when I was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1997 at the age of 40. Up till then I hadn't felt comfortable with the idea. I had previously sold *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* to the Tate myself, for very little money.

I was showing work in public spaces and was earning money by teaching and living with very small overheads. My exploded shed had a tiny budget of £250 for the materials. The blowing up was sponsored, and the labour was free. Because I was teaching I could often get students in to help me. Everything was being done on a shoestring, it was liberating because I didn't have to worry about whether it was saleable. I wasn't having to compromise in any way.

Now if I make a big suspended piece, I find I can't be as cavalier. Now I have to have more of a sense of responsibility. To think where it's going to end up.

PS: Where do you work these days? Do you still work at home or do you go to your studio?

CP: I often make large-scale works at home, in this little room. I produced most of my 2015 Whitworth Gallery show from here. *War Room* (2015), a large installation made from poppy paper, which had a specific relationship to the space was built on site. Elements in my work are often fabricated elsewhere, by people who are more technically skilled than me. *Magna Carta: An Embroidery* (2015), for instance, was hand sewn by 250 people, and put together with the aid of a great project manager at The Royal School of Needlework at Hampton Court.

I do have a studio and I go there to make some mess every now and again. But only the stuff you wouldn't want to do at home.

PS: *Your most recent commission, Transitional Object (PsychoBarn) (2016), is currently installed on the roof of the The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) in New York. How did you approach this site-specific work?*

CP: It's a recreation of the house from *Psycho* (1960). I had it recreated as accurately as I could, based on the original set, which only consisted of two facades propped up from behind. The scale of is slightly different, as is the colour. The timber cladding I used came from an old red barn that was being taken down in upstate New York. Antique barn restorers were salvaging the main frame but they weren't interested in the clapboard. I also acquired the whitewashed wood that they used for the milking areas, to make the windows. Even the corrugated metal roof was from the barn, which was waterjet cut into shingles to mimic those of the *Psycho* house. As the film is in black and white, I invested it with rich colour. The red barn is very much associated with homespun wholesomeness in America. That is why politicians use red barns as locations for their hustings.

I love the skyline of New York and I wanted to add something to new to it. The first time I went there I had the idea of building a red barn on the roof. Inspired by Hopper's paintings of red barns. Then I discovered Alfred Hitchcock based his *Psycho* house on Hopper's painting *The House by the Railroad* (1925) at MoMA. That gave me the idea of merging the barn with the house, merging these representations of good and evil.

PS: *In your work objects operate metaphorically, often standing in for people or emotions. How does psychoanalysis inform your practice?*

CP: Generally, I allow my subconscious to guide me but I don't actively try to infuse my work with psychoanalysis. Except for *Transitional Object (PsychoBarn)*, which is obviously loaded with references to it. But it's a cartoon-like, popular conception of psychoanalysis. Everybody knows Hitchcock's *Psycho* represents the mother. I like these references because they're totemic of the whole of the genre.

In the same way, the Empire State Building is totemic, and so is the Niagara Falls. I am interested in the encyclopaedic treatment of science, history and geography. That's why I used the Magna Carta entry from Wikipedia for *Magna Carta: An Embroidery* – because Wikipedia is the go to encyclopaedia that everybody uses now. It has become iconic and part of our vernacular. To make embroidery of a Wikipedia entry was interesting to me: that contrast between the handcrafted and the digital.

PS: *I was also thinking about analogue versus digital in relation to your work.*

CP: For *Magna Carta*, the digital became a physical object. Digitised little images from the Internet were sewn by a master embroider, taking up to 450 hours. This brings us back to the idea of the representational becoming abstracted. We oscillate between these two states. When you start off with the representational, the content of the work is already taken care of allowing other things to flood in: psychological, metaphorical or narrative aspects.

I love minimalists like Agnes Martin and Donald Judd, somehow I'm mimicking their tropes. My *Bullet Drawings* (2007-ongoing) might be very similar to Modernist drawings but they have a drawn out bullet as the line rather than pencil. The line has been infected. The bullet is

made to turn corners and conform to a grid. Making seemingly minimal and abstract forms become loaded with a literal content.

PS: *The shed in Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View is a classic example of that in a way. It has to hang from a grid but it's the singular object exploded. What does the title of the artwork mean to you?*

CP: 'Cold dark matter' was a scientific term that had been coined the year before I made that piece. It is used to describe matter in the universe that is known to exist but that we can't see or quantify. It is immeasurable. As a title, 'cold dark matter' also sounds deeply psychologically troubling.

The 'exploded view' is a diagrammatic image, a term describing taxonomy and measuring – pulling objects apart and labelling every bit of them. It is technical jargon for showing how something mechanical works, like a Hoover, a kettle or a motorbike. They strip it down to its component parts and it's all laid out, usually in a grid.

Taking those two titles together, one is about the unquantifiable and the other is about methods of quantifying. It's a way of formalising an explosion or an emotional crisis.

PS: *The limited edition artwork you have produced, Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View. A work in progress (2016), has a clear connection to the original exhibition and yet the images also speak to the present moment.*

CP: Explosions are something that people in peaceful countries are fascinated by. We're bombarded daily with images of explosions in the news, in films, in ads. Children are addicted to computer games that feature them. Explosions in comic strips are accompanied by 'Pow' or 'Zap'. For people who live in war torn countries, however, the explosion is the embodiment of terror.

The hot water bottle is about comfort; the umbrella (which I think was actually a sun parasol) is about shelter, both have been blown apart. The record player, which has a big hole in it, I particularly like because it reminds me of the Gerhard Richter painting of the Baader Meinhof record player, *Record Player* (1988). I remember having a similar one when I was a kid. We bought our daughter one recently because it's been re-issued as a vintage piece.

What I liked about the shed was that it operated as a kind of time capsule for the history of those objects. Hot water bottle design hasn't changed that much, parasol designs haven't changed that much and record players have become retro. So they're historic but also contemporaneous. The damage that has been made to these objects was made through a controlled explosion and not by war or by terrorism, but it still rendered the same results.

I toyed with the idea of doing another explosion piece as a visual history of warfare, using real objects and debris from the past hundred years of war. I started on the project but then couldn't do it. It felt too exploitative. That's why the exploded shed has become so powerful because people know that it was something that was controlled. If that installation was the result of an ISIS bomb you wouldn't be able to look at it. When it was made in 1991 there were IRA bombs going off in London, in pubs and other public places.

Whether you're killed by an IRA bomb, an ISIS bomb or a racist or homophobic attack – like the nail bomb in the pub on Old Compton Street in 1999 – in the end the results are the same,

whatever the intention. But the intention for me is critical. The piece is exploring those dilemmas that we all face about what's acceptable and what isn't.

PS: In safe countries, the most dominant way people encounter warfare and explosions is through photography.

CP: Certain iconic war images inform a whole culture: Don McCullin's photograph of the soldier in Vietnam, *Shell-shocked Soldier* (1968); or the recent image of the young drowned Syrian boy. Robert Capa's *The Falling Soldier* (1936) fits into this category too. It's pivotal; it sums up all those deaths. His becomes a universal death.

PS: You discussed Capa's image for the Met Museum's series of online talks, The Artist Project. It's an interesting choice in relation to your work and the idea of suspension.

CP: There is an element of suspended violence in my work. There are bullets, guns and explosions. There is friction. But Capa's *The Falling Soldier* presents a moment of peace, it's not gory. All the tension has gone out of the soldier's face. He is obviously dead but he hasn't hit the ground yet. I'm fascinated by that moment of going from life to death.

The objects in *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* are in also in this state. Like Capa's soldier, they're in limbo – suspended.

Cornelia Parker interviewed by Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery. Editorial Assistants, Rosie Ram and Ioanna Nitsou. *Chisenhale Interviews*, series editor, Polly Staple.