

Support Sheet for Teachers

Presenter: Gill Perry

Object: Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter*, 1991

Professor Gill Perry explores an installation by the British artist Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, 1991, which involved blowing up a garden shed and suspending its charred and broken fragments from the ceiling of an art gallery. Parker supervised the explosion that was managed by the British army, and then suspended the charred and broken fragments of the shed and its contents from the ceiling of the Chissenhale Gallery in East London. Suspended around a 200 watt light bulb, this installation revealed Parker's on-going interest in the transformation and metamorphosis of artistic materials.

Before watching the film with your students

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/parker-cold-dark-matter-an-exploded-view-t06949> that you can use to show to your class.

You may also want to introduce some information about installation art – a genre which is now ubiquitous in contemporary art (see discussion below).

Discussion of Key Questions (from STUDENT handout sheet)

1. What do you know about installation art?

We suggest that you give students some basic information/definitions of installation art and its importance within contemporary art. Some key points might include:

- Installations are often made up of an assemblage of objects, structures and media and can be displayed within museums or be site specific; they can interact with indoor or outdoor sites; they can be mobile or fixed; they can be permanent or temporary.
- While installations may include paintings or sculptures they typically assemble ordinary industrial, found and recycled objects, and may be combined with film or video.
- Origins of installation art can be traced to the post war period, especially the 1950s and 60s in America and Europe; they are related to environments or assemblages of found commercial debris in the work of earlier artists such as Schwitters or Duchamp, and to the environments and 'happenings' of artists such as Alan Kaprow. It is often argued that during the 1960s many artists developed installations that were more closely tied to a radical agenda, in dialogue with social contexts (Matta Clark, Vito Acconci, Yayou Kusama etc.). In installation art can be seen as a versatile and potentially subversive medium that can interact in different ways with its immediate environment.
- Installation art does away with the frame, and encourages the viewer to move around the work and experience it through time, changing viewing positions. This involves what is sometimes called a more 'embodied' form of looking.

There are some useful sources that can support your teaching here, including publications by Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, Tate Publishing; G. Perry and P. Wood (eds), *Themes in Contemporary Art*, Yale UP, 2004; see especially chapters 5 and 6 by Kristine Stiles and Gill Perry.

2. What do you think this work represents? Describe what you see on the screen and consider how you might view this work. What forms or objects can you identify?

Students will probably comment on the extraordinary transformation of an (exploded) shed into a curiously seductive hanging installation lit from the centre by a light bulb. Charred, broken and twisted objects are barely recognisable as the stuff of garden sheds, until you get closer and recognise the bent parts of a bicycle or broken and blackened tools.

The work seems to fulfil a key requirement of installation art in that it does away with the frame and cannot be viewed from one position. The viewer is encouraged to move around the suspended objects and explore different angles and shadows (note Parker emphasises the importance of shadows as an essential part of the work).

3. How are the materials used and displayed in the work?

This overlaps with (2) but in your discussion you could emphasise the everyday, ordinary character of objects that are now transformed and displayed in a formal gallery setting. Charred rubbish and bric a brac traditionally stored in garden shed has now taken on an aesthetic quality that we associate with sculpture and hallowed monuments. Clearly the use of light and shadows contributes to this effect.

After watching the film

1. In what ways does *Cold Dark Matter* belong in the category 'installation art'? To what extent would you identify it as an art work?
2. What effects (artistic, social) do you think the artist was trying to achieve in this work?
3. What does the choice of title contribute to the meaning of this work?
4. Are you familiar with any other installation works by Cornelia Parker? If so list the work/s and explain any shared concerns that you can identify

There are no clear right or wrong answers to these final questions. They are rather designed to test the student's ability to absorb and think about information provided in the podcast. There are many aspects of the work that seem to fit the category of installation art, as noted above. There's no single viewing point and it's an assemblage of (exploded) everyday banal objects. That said, it is also organised in a careful and even sculptural way, creating an evocative (and even seductive) installation. The podcast and information on the Tate site offer plenty of information on why Parker chose a pseudo-scientific title. It might be argued that this sort of title adds to the ambiguity of the work as a whole, which suggests strange transformations and domestic allusions combined with the more environmental or scientific implications of the term 'cold dark matter'.

Many other installations are shown on the Tate and Frith Street site. *50 Pieces of Silver* also famously involved transformation (being flattened by a steam roller!) as did her work *Neither From Nor Towards*, 1992 <http://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/artwork/neither-nor-towards> in which she also suspended transformed objects. These were bricks from a house that had fallen off the cliffs of Dover through land erosion and had been weathered by storms and sea water.

Comparative analysis

Choose another example of **installation** art produced within the last three decades that you are familiar with, and compare the two works:

- a) How would you list the materials used in each?
- b) Do they both invite a similar physical engagement from the viewer?
- c) What kinds of meanings are suggested or evoked by both?
- d) What associations or references can find in each? Are there any similarities and significant differences?
- e) These are both works of recent art. Do either have anything to say about contemporary experience or social life?

Obviously answers to this analysis will depend on the comparative work/s chosen. Possible well-known examples (suggested on the Students' Sheet might include Tracey Emin's *My Bed*, 1999, or her *Knowing My Enemy*, 2002, which might provoke some interesting comparative points (domestic objects or huts). For example, all three use domestic objects or spaces which they transform dramatically, although Emin reconstructs her beach hut at the end of a constructed pier. *Knowing My Enemy* has a more sculptural and even inaccessible form. While *My Bed* explores the personal and sleazy aspects of the iconography of the bedroom, Parker's radically transforms the banal contents of the shed, sometimes seen to be associated with particularly British form of masculinity (pottering in the garden). In contrast, Hatoum's *Light Sentence* references prison cages, but also uses a central light source, integrating shadows and changing viewpoints into the work. And as mentioned in the podcast, Parker's work was made at a time when the fear of (bomb) explosions was part of social life on the UK mainland, and especially in large cities.

Of the three installations listed/suggested *Cold Dark Matter* is more obviously engaged with transformation and metamorphosis. Both Hatoum and Emin's work involve structures, but these are adapted from or based on pre-existing structures. Parker, however, completely demolishes/explodes the original domestic structure to great a rather different suspended display.

Other Online Activities:

The work is owned by Tate who have provided many online resources:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/parker-cold-dark-matter-an-exploded-view-t06949>

Tate resources include a full section on *Cold Dark Matter* with useful information on the shed, the objects, the explosion and other aspects of the work:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/cold-dark-matter/explosion>

Parker's gallery site (Frith Street Gallery) has a full range of images of her works, including her recent work: *The Roof Garden Commission: Cornelia Parker, Transitional Object (PsychoBarn)*, 2016, installed on the roof of The Metropolitan Museum of Art:

http://www.frithstreetgallery.com/artists/publications/cornelia_parker

Activity: there is quite a lot of information on these sites about the role of explosions in her work. Make some notes on the significance of explosions and transformations in Parker's work.

Transformations, metamorphoses and what Parker describes as ‘cartoon deaths’, or archetypal images familiar from childhood have featured prominently in Parker’s work. There’s a lot of information on the Tate site as to why these processes interest her, and how they contribute to the aesthetic project.

She is quoted as saying:

‘Somehow the idea and imminence of the ‘explosion’ in society seemed such an iconic thing. You were being constantly bombarded with its imagery, from the violence of the comic strip, through action films, in documentaries about Super Novas and the Big Bang, and least of all on the news in never ending reports of war.’

We are told that as an MA student she made small models or representations of explosions, which she then left outside to disintegrate. She was looking for something that happened in a split second but that was also durational through time. It could be argued then that part of this work was ‘perfromative’; it’s pre-history involved a strategic activity. But it also leaves a complex object or installation that lasts (albeit transformed) – that is the ‘art work’.

Other useful reading:

Iwona Blazwick, *Cornelia Parker*, (Thames and Hudson, 2013)

Cornelia Parker, exhibition catalogue, The Whitworth, Manchester, 2015