



CORNELIA PARKER
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Where are we to find comfort in these secular times? If the pearly gates ain't there, how are we to cope with the fact we grow old and die? The existentialists urged action in the face of the absurdity of our inevitable passing. Every choice we make, they would tell us sternly, defines us: the plea of helplessness they rebuff with the accusation of *mauvaise foi*. Thus, if we consider Sartre's "Roads to Freedom" the hero Mathieu is initially paralysed, unable to act. Cornelia Parker is not going to help him. She eschews agendas. She wouldn't, in her work, recommend action, i.e. tell Mathieu to go and fight fascism in Spain. By contrast, Parker embraces flux and uncertainty, and I think it's that embrace which makes contemporary audiences warm to her. We live in an era of relativity: at the deepest level is our awareness of an universe the scale and nature of which we can neither encompass nor explain, at a spiritual level we see religion as a cultural phenomenon and no longer absolute, and at a psychological level we're increasingly in doubt as to the truth or constancy of anything we're told or shown. These are the riffs in our fin de millennium blues.

Revealingly, Parker speaks of there being all manner of shocks and dramas all the time in our lives. We can see here the artist's sense of that relativity I've referred to, her sense of endlessly variable scale: a moment of rage one day might have the intensity and therefore "bigness" in one person's life which a year of warfare might not have in another's. Returning to Sartre's poor hero receiving no urgings from Parker's work to take action - we find that by contrast, she sets out a belief that art, or rather the experience of looking at art, can have a spiritual dimension. It is out of deepest conviction she ensures her work is not closed off, not loaded down by her own feelings or attitudes. She is happy to locate her work in a wide frame: she cites the work of long dead artists on show in the world's galleries, their

personal intentions mostly inaccessible. She wants her work to provide a trigger to contemplation; she wants it to enable us to find our own truth.

Parker is interested in language. The phrases she uses to describe her pieces are not "titles" but part of the work. She's also obviously interested in material and what can be done with it. She's interested in ideas too, and in conversation with her one is struck by the way she shifts between these things. She refers to religion and to the metal lead as both being "heavy material," to objects like a wedding ring as being "dense" and "loaded", to time-honoured phrases as being the same. I think this ability to think of material, language and ideas as being a single thing - a kind of soil in which to get work to grow - is a key both to understanding Parker's work and to explaining its success.

She speaks of museums being like factories - both places are of great and unaffected interest to her - because she thinks of a museum as a place that manufactures history. It's a compulsion, in a sense, that we must make sense of what is around us. We must add the labels. She has said "I've often placed a history upon the object."(1) She has in mind here, particularly, such pieces as *Object That Fell Off The White Cliffs Of Dover* - though it's noteworthy she omits her action here: the poor silver teapot in question didn't fall, it was thrown - it didn't jump, it was pushed. Perhaps she likes to keep that ambiguity, given a cliff can serve for suicide. There is frequently in her work a moment of sudden violent action: dropping, crushing, shooting, a bolt of lightning... Images of death and change. But the violent event is invariably something which has occurred (*Thirty Pieces of Silver*, silver crushed by a steamroller) or which is yet to occur (*One Day This Glass Will Break* - a stack of tilting tumblers.) She stands, therefore, a long way from artists like Chris Burden (who had himself shot through the arm as a performance work) or like Walter De Maria (whose famous piece in the Nevada desert for the Dia Foundation is about the lightning actually striking).

There may or may not be a "gender element" in this difference. But certainly, I think it's a crucial component in the way Parker's work retains the openness she wants. She allows these sudden shocks to have both good and bad possibilities. Parker studied sculpture in the late 1970's, and as she says herself "there weren't many women doing sculpture." She feels, looking back, that she reacted quite strongly against the "earth bound" and often rather macho tradition so present around her at that time: the Henry Moore tradition - the heavy, the hewn, the finely crafted. She learned about *arte povera* and was delighted by the opening up of possibilities it gave her. She preferred ephemeral materials (plaster, paper,

fabric) and she preferred to produce lots of work. You could say it was a case of ideas (rather than attitudes) "becoming form" - but lots of them. At this time her work was essentially abstract. She was particularly interested in gravity - in defying it and yet defining it, and the characteristic devices of suspending material, of inverting objects, were early and liberating strategies in her work.

In 1984, two or three years out of college, she went to New York for a couple of months and came back with a model of the Empire State Building. She moved to London, she was in short-term accommodation and, like a refugee, her aim became to make work she could put in a suitcase and take with her. She went on to make good work from that model, taking cast after cast, engaging in her desire to re-activate the banal, engaging in transmutation... A time of breakthrough: in a fruitful paradox, she began on the one hand to make work which was portable and in tune with what must have looked like a shifting future and on the other hand, she was re-connecting herself with her past, and with the wider world outside the confines of "art and what it should be about" (and six years of art school). Reaching out for the common or garden, for the trinkets we all have on the mantelpiece, she re-invigorated her own art. One could invoke the Biblical image of the rejected stone forming the crucial element in the new building. Things rejected as being too banal, too unimportant, too negative, or referring to areas traditionally spurned by fine art sensibilities (nostalgia, for example, or the domestic) - these have often been the substance of her art and she clearly enjoys the risks of using them.

Though the notion might seem to come from a very different time and set of priorities, it illuminates Parker's approach that she herself speaks of "truth to materials." She won't make one material seem like another or try to make it adopt the qualities of another; rather she pushes a material to do something which other people tell her it cannot do. She is forever in protracted dialogue with people she needs for their expertise and yet who she has to challenge. There's enjoyment in these contacts, being in communication with people from very different worlds to her own. It's a creative "friction" (a term in her mind currently as a key both to immediate concerns and possibly to future developments in her work.)

When still a student, she would play with the impossible: making a shaft of light into a solid object is one example she recalls now. A work I recall is *Hanging Fire* in 1987 - one of several pieces she has done for the Forest of Dean Sculpture Trail - where we see flames made solid and inverted, and we find a typical richness of allusion: the visual pun, and the overtones of, firstly, fire as the great dread of foresters and, secondly, the phrase "hanging fire" which derives

(OK maybe you need to be a word buff to get this) from guns, firearms - thus connecting with shooting.

The sensitivity to materials is combined with a feeling for allusion and metaphor: this is shown well in her piece *Wedding Ring Drawing (Circumference Of A Living Room)*. A 22 carat ring has been made into enormous lengths of immensely fine wire; it looks like hair, or maybe the work of Rumpelstiltskin. She sets other things resonating: the intriguing realisation it's possible to achieve such a transformation of the material; there's the symbolism of a marriage better seen as lots of knots and tangles than a neat ring on the finger, and then there's the reference to a living room, evoking the notion of marriage as necessarily encompassing the domestic and, also (sliding back to the ring as symbol of commitment) having an element of enclosure. The word "drawing" is a pun: the art term, and the stretching out of the wire, though the artist clearly does think of these pieces as a form of drawing.

In *Measuring Niagara With A Teaspoon* we find another typically rigorous conceptual framework built round an absurdly vast disjunction: it's between a teaspoon - capable therefore of holding some 5 ml of fluid - and the millions of gallons roaring over the Falls. This disjunction is expressed in material terms by the wire that's drawn from a Georgian silver spoon to the same length as the height of Niagara. It's a joke (again, a kind of pun on two kinds of measuring) but somehow compressed like a spring; there's all that tension implied between society's constraints and the chaotic forces of "Nature" or maybe our own passions.

It's significant too, that we don't know if the Falls are the height the artist claims for them. The truth is she doesn't know: one encyclopedia might say one thing, one another. Does anyone know? How do you measure it? When do you measure it? Chaos theory opened up these questions and taught us there are no absolutes: we must look for the pattern rather than the fixed point. Parker understands the pattern. She feels a closeness with scientific enquiry, feels at one with the realisations that knowledge is never more than the latest hypothesis.

In *Ghost Town Threshold / Threshold That's Never Been Stepped On (1997)*, there are two short lengths of doorstep - the one obviously very old and rotted, the other pristine. We have something here as "loaded" as all the objects which Parker chooses: this is the thing women used to be carried over (I mean, they aren't any more, are they?) It's the line, the crossing, and full of notions of territory, safety, and rejection. ("Darken my door no more.") And there's an interesting additional meaning lurking here, albeit one not perhaps consciously in play with this

piece. The Latin word *limen* - meaning boundary, wall, threshold - lies at the root of subliminal. The concept has relevance: Parker has said she uses conscious strategies to try to release the unconscious in her work - interestingly, since one would never connect the two, Alan Davie said once that his work process is to "hoodwink the consciousness." Parker regards the original intention she might have at the start of making a work as a "red herring." For her, the work isn't about that.

If we turn to the sublime we find the 'sub' here derives not from its common meaning of "beneath" but from another meaning - "approaching" or "towards." The boundary then implied is not our threshold, but the ultimate: the limit, the loftiest notion to which we can aspire. This brings us back to my comment earlier: Parker wants to create space for contemplation - perhaps this is seen as well as in any piece she has made when we look at *Mass*, when she uses hundreds of fragments of charcoal from a church struck by lightning to create a "three dimensional drawing." She knows we each of us bring to our viewing of the work all manner of feelings and attitudes to the notion of a church and we can search ourselves for the meaning we wish to attach to this evidence of the power of "natural forces" on the fabric of a building dedicated to God.

To sublimate, aside from the psycho-analytical sense, can mean the conversion of a material from solid to vapour and back again - a meaning, when we dug it out of the dictionary, Cornelia rather liked. She says she wants her work to be "vaporous", to be "porous" and allow us to enter it: again, she is evoking material and idea at the same time. In *Ghost Town Threshold*, the artist sets up a striking confluence: a doorstep from which everyone has departed, a doorstep to which no one has yet arrived. Time is curved around to form a circle, it is flowing both ways. It's like infinity: which, if it's immeasurable, must encompass the impossibly big as well as the impossibly small. Cornelia Parker's work, at ease with notions of death as mutation, can lift us out of our dulling certainties, enabling us to transmute, to reconstitute the incidental object (the small) as the major question (the massive). Like Captain Kirk, we're beamed up.

Hugh Stoddart

(1) *Avoided Object*, catalogue interview. Chapter, Cardiff 1996.