Parker's pieces

Some readers were bemused, and others amused, to find a series of images by Cornelia Parker in the pages of *Nature* last autumn. Her work invites us to let our imaginations run free.

Martin Kemp

“What’s this bollocks doing in *Nature*?” The question, more rhetorical than inquisitive or grammatical, was loudly posed in the biology department’s tea room at Leicester University by a postgraduate faced with the enigmatic insertion in the journal last October of Cornelia Parker’s photographs of “Navel fluff” from a “sailor (while at sea)”, a “farmer” and an “architect” (*Nature* 389, 668; 1997). In truth, none of Parker’s magnified images of delicate residues insinuated by the editor in that or the three preceding issues looked visually out of place. The problem was one of the context for meaning.

Parker’s pieces do not rely on fixed meaning. They do not communicate with the studiously unambiguous parades of hypothesis, evidence, analysis and demonstration that is the aspiration of articles and letters in this journal.

Rather they exploit a resonant series of visual and verbal associations to provide invitingly open fields for our imaginative exploration. Residues of memory – of the acts that have deposited what we now see, or of their pedigree of ownership – are central to her associative processes.

The scored furrows in microphotographs of a record of the “Nutcracker Suite” once owned by Hitler and the lacquer residue etched from a master recording at the Beatles’ Abbey Road Studios (*Nature* 389, 335 & 548; 1997) exploit the familiar frisson of fame by association and also strike deeper — into such issues as sweet music for an evil listener and “negatives of sound” (as she calls them).

Cold Dark Matter exemplifies the voraciously encyclopedic reach of her associative creations, a reach that extends from childish play to the cosmos of science. To begin with, an inoffensive garden shed, illuminated from within and stuffed with acquired clut-

Parker’s *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (Shed and contents being blown up by the army), 1991.

ter, stood in an otherwise empty gallery. Then, courtesy of the British Army, the shed was blown apart in a centrifugal cascade of fractured planks and material possessions — a blasted plastic dinosaur, a boot rent asunder, a savaged hot-water bottle, a euphonium wrenched out of tune.... Systematically harvested, the debris has been reassembled in the gallery as a galaxy of fragments hanging on wires. Lit by an inner bright star, its shadows collide with the confining walls, roof and floor.

Parker is not illustrating a scientific concept. Rather she is realizing the metaphorical poetry inherent in science’s cool analyses and calculated acts of naming. The moment of catastrophic expansion is frozen in a state of uncertainty, its ‘implicate order’ (in the physicist David Bohm’s sense) suspended between total disintegration and potential

reconstitution. The ‘exploded view’ plays on the convention of technical illustration, virtually invented by Leonardo da Vinci, in which a mechanism is visually dismembered to allow the discerning and naming of the parts.

Cold Dark Matter orbits around themes of gathering and dispersal, expansion and contraction, explosion and implosion, inhaling and exhaling, falling and suspension, transformation and stasis, peace and violence, making and breaking, playful and sinister — alternative states existing simultaneously within the phenomenon, and available for oscillating perception by viewers who are willing to free themselves to participate in her mind games. □

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