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Presenting and Curating Contemporary Installation Art; The Work of Cornelia Parker and Céline

Condorelli

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Museum Studies
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Dr. Judy Bullington

In regards to contemporary British art, changes in curation style have caused shifts in the way art is presented. The presentation of art in institutional and public spaces can provide a means of reaching the public about specific topics that artists and activists want to explore. In Britain, contemporary art has the chance to reach an incredibly widespread audience due to its globalized presence and the prestige of the institutions that reside in the country. The way art is exhibited has implications depending on the location it is shown within. The globalized scale of the contemporary art world creates the perfect environment for artists to take on the roles of activists, as they have the likelihood of being able to reach a greater audience. A question that arises is how effective activism art is when placed within the institution versus when it is exhibited outside of the institution. In order to examine art within and outside the institution, particularly in regards to installation art, the work of Cornelia Parker and Céline Condorelli will be explored. Their work, both presented to the British public, takes on very different functions, while still sharing the trait of being inherently political and sharing a sense of urgency in regards to contemporary issues of display and how institutions operate. The identity of the artists informs their work and how they present themselves to the British public. As a renowned British artist, Cornelia Parker's work is poised in the perfect position to explore what that identity really entails and what issues come with it. Céline Condorelli work helps expand on the distinctions between public and private and how those labels challenge contemporary art practice.

British artist Cornelia Parker is an installation and sculpture artist working with destruction and the reinvention of found objects. Born in Cheshire, England, she often deals with politics and British identity. She plays with the notion of space within her work and subverts the expectations that are commonly imposed by gallery and museum spaces. She believes that the importance of her work is embedded within the practice, rather than with just the product. In her

work she deals with destruction and resurrection. She often destroys objects as an integral part of her artistic process. The violent nature of her process is used to physically deconstruct the object she is dealing with, and while doing so, she becomes ‘an active participant in the development of its story.’¹ After the work is destroyed she repurposes it in ways that often reveals a new perspective on the object used. In her retrospective at the Tate Britain, it is clear how her work is presented to dismantle the perceived notion of how a gallery space should function and present artwork. Her work reflects intangible ideas, and out of them creates tangible ways to explore their implications. It explores many social and political issues of the contemporary world, using imaginative ways to discuss violence, national identity and human rights. The exhibition particularly seems to comment on British fragility. Much of her body of work deals with political themes related to British identity. This can be seen in her installation *Island*, in which she showcases tiles she acquired in 2017 from the houses of parliament. These tiles are suspended in a greenhouse, which is painted with chalk from the cliffs of Dover.² The presence of elements of Dover is seen in much of her work, one of her installations from 1992, *Neither From Nor Towards*, was created from bricks found at the beaches of Dover. They belonged to the houses that used to exist on the cliffs. The bricks appear smooth and rounded on the edges, commenting on coastal erosion. The motif of including elements from Dover seem to represent Britain's insular nature as well as become symbols of “the impact of climate change and climate catastrophe.”³ The work *Island*, created specifically for the retrospective at the Tate refers to Britain as the island, alone in its isolation. It comments on Britain in the time of Brexit; separated from Europe during a time of change regarding the climate catastrophe and unease within the British public.⁴

Her work *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* deals with the inherently political nature of the explosion. When deciding who would assist her with the endeavor she thought specifically about the implications of this action. She said in an interview with Lisa Tickner that the global nature of explosions as a weapon, and how they are happening all around the world is part of what draws her to the theme.⁵ she considers the object that is blown up and placed within the museum space what she would call a “universal explosion” something that has “space in it and people can project onto it.”⁶ Access to the aftermath of explosions is not something usually accessible to the public, and presenting it this way in a context that is accessible, allows for greater dialogue about their implications. Her work is classified as sculptural but does not occupy the same space classical sculpture does. It is imbued with importance and poses questions not because of what it is, but because of what it once was. It is antithetical to the idea of a monument, in that it does not memorialize the objects that she uses, rather it is the act of deconstruction that challenges our perceptions of the content she puts forth. Her work is inherently political in nature, yet she still tries to maintain an openness to dialogue and discussion. She wants the work to reveal new things to her during the process of creating it.⁷ In this way it is the work done outside of the gallery in the public sphere that holds the most weight for her in her practice.

When looking at Celine Condorelli’s work the question arises of how one should look at public art versus art within an institution. As an Italian artist placing work within both the public and private sectors of Britain, it is important to look at how the work exists within the context and how it is interacting with the audience. Céline Condorelli’s background in architecture informs how she structures her exhibitions. She merges installation, exhibition, political discourse, and unique notions of display. Her work largely intends to alter what she calls

‘existing conditions’ which she understands as “the socio-political context of a site, the architecture of a building, the display and specific use of objects, to the wider conditions under which people live and work.”⁸ Her installation work intends to “[Remove] these conditions (and their relationships) from their supposed state of neutrality or allocated place, and [turn] them into the core of an ongoing inquiry”⁹

Conceptual contemporary art since its arrival has extended its reach throughout both public and private domains, often overlapping them indiscriminately.¹⁰ Art in these domains takes many forms and encompasses a variety of medias, including a concern with the Internet and community-based practices.¹¹ This in turn results in an “artistic tendency” that is directed towards “decentralization but also democratization, as interest in contemporary art is disseminated the world over.”¹² Especially with installation work such as Condorelli’s or Parker’s, there is a sense that the focus is placed upon continued work within the community as well as interest in more contemporary issues. Within contemporary conceptual art practice, there appears to be a concern with subverting the traditional museum space. Condorelli’s work expands on this, particularly it pays attention to the ideas of display and the elitism that is often seen within institutional spaces and contemporary culture in general. She considers the idea of restriction of touch, particularly the idea that culture should be “something you look at from a distance.”¹³ She proposes a more intimate relationship with culture, creating installations that appear inviting and allow for the opportunity to be handled. Her work with plants and interactive playgrounds speaks to this sentiment. Her work, playful and intended for interaction and touch, challenges traditional museum practices.

Her exhibition at Talbot Rice Gallery explores the politics of display, creating an interactive space that immerses the viewer in her visual and auditory landscape. She creates an

exhibition in which she alters her creations to fit within the space they occupy. This exhibition is a prime example of how her work intends to activate the space it occupies. The first room a viewer walks into is filled with elements of plant life and plant history. This becomes a common theme within the exhibition; she works to bring elements of the outside into the museum space. The first few spaces in the gallery consist of white cube spaces, which contrast with her inclusion of natural elements. Her installation *After Work*, which was created with Ben Rivers, showcases elements of her public artwork in which she creates permanent playgrounds. Moving into the historic Georgian gallery, in her installation *Thinking through Skin*, explores color and image production, her color experiments exist in context with found objects of her own collection. In creating this installation she thought about Cephalopods, and the way they perceived the world through their skin.¹⁴ The work mimics this idea, the installation consisting of fabric and shifting imagery. The curation of her work in this way is intentional, she explains in an interview for studio international that the way the gallery is set up, particularly how it is split into two distinct sections, one a historic Georgian gallery that was once a natural history museum and one white cube spaces fashioned in contemporary style, imbues the gallery with a unique combination of historical contrasts.¹⁵ The space, part of Edinburgh University, has an important cultural heritage, particularly with the intact Georgian gallery, to her she believes that “this means you enter within a history of museums as well.”¹⁶ This creates an interesting conversation between the contemporary work and the historic space that is not often highlighted in this way, as a contrast and element of a contemporary exhibition.

Whether in a white cube space or in a natural history museum, institutional spaces inflict upon their exhibitions a canon method of display. In an institutional space it is difficult to remove the artwork from being implicated in the expansive history of how museum’s have historically

alienated works from their original context. Condorelli considers the museum and institution space as a vital part of the art world, but recognizes it as a space, for better or for worse, polluted by its own history.¹⁷ She uses her work to try to expose these histories, and hopes that doing so within this context, she will be able to draw attention to things and people that assist in the institution that are often left out of the artistic canon.¹⁸ She intends to be non-exclusive in her exposing of history, and her work often will acknowledge the individuals and programs set in place “whose invisible labor is not usually recognised, and [makes] sure all the technicians are named.”¹⁹ Her work and interaction within institutions names those who have remained unnamed until now. In the current artistic landscape, the role of the curator fits into a larger context than the traditional curator would. Curators work closely with the artist in order to provide information, and connections, in order to present exhibitions that can challenge society. More than ever the line between curator and artist is blurring, and the collaboration when creating an exhibition is a vital part of the contemporary process. Especially in gallery spaces like Talbot Rice that are connected to universities, and emphasize innovation and learning, artists have more freedom to work closely with curators and craft exhibitions that speak to their intentions more clearly.

In her public artwork, particularly her interactive playground designs, she is interested in the notion of play. Combining elements of architectural intervention within the museum space with classic exhibition curation, she explores space, particularly its relationship to public and private domains. In her exploration she says she “quickly uncovers other levels, like the economic, political, and social context” when she looks into the histories of these institutions.²⁰ To her, these conditions that she uncovers in the institution are all interconnected. She believes that the connected nature of these issues are often understood when you really understand how

people interact with, and are related to, the “social and political context of a space.”²¹ Using this context she is able to decide what she wants to link her work to and what aspects of the space and its involvement with the community that she wants her installations to work with or against.

In 2019, the South London Gallery commissioned Céline Condorelli to create a playground for the Elmington Estate in London entitled “Tools for Imagination” the playground was created in conversation with the community. A piece, titled the same, would occupy the gallery space. The work inside the gallery connected to ideas of play, highlighting the relationship between free-time and work, “work that we think is invisible but that we entirely rely on” and questioning the hidden labor of the production of art and culture inside and outside of institutional spaces.²² The work within the institution was accompanied by a video installation that provided more context for the work. Public art is inseparable from social reality in ways that work in institutional places are not. The value of public art is often intended for the benefit of the public, but has often failed to consider the true public aspect and how that impacts the people that interact with it. If public art is uncritically imposed for the sake of “public good” without truly taking into account its implications, it fails to clarify whose interest it is really meant for.²³ Ken Lum, author of *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life*, posits that “history demonstrates that when poorly planned or when divorced from the social or economic reality of the city or neighborhood in which it resides, public art can be a cause of more public harm than public good.”²⁴ Condorelli’s work takes this idea to heart and creates work in conversation with the public. Her work reflects clearly the needs of the community and the identity of the individuals interacting with it.

In order to understand public art and how artists who create it are in the unique position to address relevant contemporary issues, Jurgen Habermas’s notion of the public sphere can offer

a helpful framework. Contemporary art practice envisions the artist as activist, social architect, and innovator. In Jurgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere and communicative action he asserts that "communicative actions" can help to "arrive at uncoerced consensus where social actions are initiated not by intimidation or manipulation but by valid reasons."²⁵ In the public sphere, there are no preimposed ideas of meaning or interpretation. His belief is that only in the public sphere can there be discourse that is free from the bias of the institution. The public sphere is, in his mind, a "social phenomenon" that is unique from other concepts of the social order because the "public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organization."²⁶ In artistic practice, the distinction between the institution and the public sphere is an important one because both spaces come with very different histories and presenting work within a given place can change how the work is perceived.

Public art in the contemporary age can highlight the diversity of the public as well as the "multiplicity of discourses that make up the public realm."²⁷ Simultaneously it can acknowledge the difficult challenge of reconciling these differences. In doing this public art does not only represent these issues or offer a single interpretation, but instead is able to provide a forum in which critical engagement and dialogue can exist.²⁸ In Merryday's work regarding the Juergen Habermas's philosophies in relation to art, *The Relevance of Juergen Habermas's Concept of the Public Sphere for Contemporary Public Art Practices*, he asserts that contemporary public art, in the fashion of avant-garde movements such as Conceptual Art or Activist Art, is more concerned with "dialogue and process than with a tangible end product."²⁹ These processes can be better equipped to exist outside of institutional spaces often due to the ephemeral or site specific nature of public installation work. This is seen particularly in Condorelli's work, as her work with

playgrounds functions very differently in the public sphere versus inside the traditional gallery space.

The work made by Parker and Condorelli both contain sentiments that seem to echo each other, while still being presented in different ways. Both artists offer, within their art, an extension past the walls of the gallery. The focus on what is being done outside of the exhibition space is just as important as what is being created within the institution. The intention with this seems to be to create work that can foster dialogue with the viewer through multiple means. However, as is often talked about in regards to Condorelli's work, "the reception of objects and artworks are never immune to the conditions of their display."³⁰ Artwork, wherever it is displayed, will begin to be associated with the institutional bias that the museum space cannot be freed of. Successful contemporary curation tends to embrace this aspect of institutional display and uses the work as a commentary to create dialogue between the work and the space. Both contemporary and historical art spaces have the ability to become sites of "sustained critical inquiry, where the activities of artists, writers, researchers and other cultural practitioners can intersect,' and where discourse can help inform the creation of new methods that can be 'developed in order to address the contemporary condition and to think about (or sometimes even enact) the possibilities for change."³¹ In order to occupy this unique niche, the main qualities a gallery or institution must have to distinguish themselves are "commitment, sustainability and flexibility."³²

Notes

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