

Poetic Physicality by Danielle O'Connor

I have recently become aware of a contemporary art practice phenomenon, not just within my own practice and in the way that I work but in the work of other artists as well. I have coined this term 'poetic physicality'. Poetic physicality predominantly occurs within sculptural installations, due to its spatial/immersive attributes. I have identified it in the works of Cornelia Parker, Monika Grzymala, Martin Boyce and Chiharu Shiota. The 'poetic' in the name, refers to the conceptual, the use of visual metaphor and how these come across with a strong embodied sensibility. The physicality refers to the strong materiality and physicality of the making, as well as the experiencing of a work. The most significant factor of poetic physicality is that it creates a conceptual feeling through the work which is physically embodied and experienced.

The idea of using poetics in contemporary art is not a particularly new concept, but as far as I am aware there has not been the connection made of poetics to the physical component. A thesis written by Christina Murdoch Mills, ('Materiality as the Basis for the Aesthetic Experience in Contemporary Art') positions us closer to these ideas, "The artwork's physicality, those aspects that can be sensed and verified by viewers, is a first consideration; physicality impacts content and, subsequently, meaning.¹" From her perspective, the senses are the basis for physically knowing and understanding a work. Taking these ideas a step further; in the same way that words of poetry can be physically felt and embodied, the use of the visual language and metaphor can be felt through the senses. The use of metaphor has also historically been used in conceptualism where objects and pieces are compared and juxtaposed. Poetic physicality is similar in conceptual language, the metaphorics and poetics are important, but so is the physical atmosphere the work creates. In 'Psychology of Contemporary Art', it discusses art metaphors as having "meanings (that) are understood intuitively[...] without the need to translate them into their verbal equivalents"². This immediacy of affect³ and understanding shows the profound physical nature of poetic physicality.

In relation to current art conversations, poetic physicality could be compared to ideas of 'new materialism' and 'material thinking', as these each have a distinct relationship with the materials and the way that it is perceived. New materialism is a return to matter,⁴ inspired by Jane Bennett's ideas on 'vital materialism'. It has an emphasis on material agency, the energy and life a material holds as well as the physicality of the material.⁵ Poetic physicality differs in the sense that it is not just about the physical materiality, but also how the conceptual side of the work creates a feeling and atmospheric quality. It could be considered however, that there would be some crossovers, where a piece under new materialism also holds poetic physicality aspects. Paul Carter's 'Material Thinking,' is another notion similar to poetic physicality. This is due to the fact, that it is about the process of making, and thinking

¹ Christina Murdoch Mills, 'Materiality as the Basis for the Aesthetic Experience in Contemporary Art', 2009., 43.

² Gregory Minissale, *The Psychology of Contemporary Art* (New York, UNITED STATES: Cambridge University Press, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=1543544>, p166

³ Emilie Deleuze, 'Gilles Deleuze, Lecture Transcripts on Spinoza's Concept of Affect', 2004, 28.

⁴ 'New Materialism(s) – Critical Posthumanism Network', accessed 8 March 2021, <https://criticalposthumanism.net/new-materialisms/>.

⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things*, E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Duke University Press, 2010).

through a material.⁶ It brings up interesting points of experiencing a work with a sense of embodiment, which is also significant in poetic physicality. It does not however, address the conceptual and poetic nature of installations. In recent years, a preoccupation with the physical, embodiment and materiality has been a topic of discussion, “Art engages our senses via materiality. In this way, works of art provide a much-needed anchor during what could be described as an age of disembodiment, this digital age.”⁷ It seems, there is a calling and appeal to the tangible, physical nature of works. This is what makes poetic physicality a relevant contemporary notion within the art world today.

Cornelia Parker, British sculptural artist, relates to the notion of poetic physicality in the way that she reconstructs materials poetically through both physical and conceptual processes⁸. Working quite intuitively with a material, Cornelia makes use of the innate material agency within a material; this is then displayed in such a poetically conceptual manner that highlights the physical nature of the material. This dance between the physical and the conceptual can be seen very clearly in her piece, *Subconscious of a Monument*. For this work, she used rock and clay that had been excavated from underneath the Leaning Tower of Pisa. As Cornelia says, “It’s like it has exhaled all the earth that has been taken away to stabilise the tower, to rectify its lean.”⁹ Making use of this memory and the history within the rock, she hung the pieces to reflect and reinforce a feeling of gravity. This created an immersive experience for viewers, where they can physically feel and embody the weight, balance and sense of gravity within the piece; as well as seeing how it relates to the history and nature of the material. In this way of utilising both the physical and conceptual nature of a work, Cornelia Parker’s work sits within the realm of poetic physicality.

Monika Grzymala is another artist whose work holds a strong connection to poetic physicality; this can be seen in not just the work in itself but the making process as well. Monika Grzymala is a Berlin based artist, known for her large scale installations made from lines of black masking tape. Not only do these pieces hold a strong material physicality, they have a strong emotive and poetic nature; qualities of poetic physicality. Her pieces are emotionally charged with a physical sensibility. “The spatial drawings are delicate, transient, and almost ethereal, but also balanced out by a feeling of persistent sense, materiality, and gesture.”¹⁰ The work seems to come alive as an immersive piece to be physically sensed and experienced. Monika draws from her emotions and uses poetry to inform her work. Curator Anne-Marie St-Jean Aubre explains, “They act more as metaphors for a mental state [...] What she perceives and feels is translated in the work through a back-and-forth movement between her interiority and external factors that present themselves to her, guiding her sensitivity.”¹¹ Monika has an intimate relationship with the making process, where her emotions and senses guide her. What is most notable is the fact that her work becomes

⁶ Paul Carter, *Material Thinking : The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne University Press, 2004).

⁷ Christina Murdoch Mills, ‘Materiality as the Basis for the Aesthetic Experience in Contemporary Art’, 2009, 43.

⁸ ‘Hanging Fire (Suspected Arson) | Icaboston.Org’, accessed 17 June 2021, <https://www.icaboston.org/art/cornelia-parker/hanging-fire-suspected-arson>.

⁹ ‘Cornelia Parker in Conversation with Rachel Kent | Stories & Ideas | MCA Australia’, accessed 16 June 2021, <https://www.mca.com.au/stories-and-ideas/cornelia-parker-conversation-rachel-kent/>.

¹⁰ ‘Monika Grzymala’, Artspace, accessed 15 June 2021, <http://www.artspace.com/monika-grzymala>.

¹¹ ‘Monika Grzymala – Exhibition at Musée d’art de Joliette – Summer 2018’, Musée d’art de Joliette, accessed 15 June 2021, <https://www.museejoliette.org/en/expositions/monika-grzymala/>.

a clear metaphor and reflection of what she was feeling, the audience can physically see and feel it through her work. This can be seen in her solo show at Hafnarhús gallery with her piece *Envoi*, inspired by Octavio Paz's poem with the same name. *Envoi* is French for 'send out' and "not to just send out a letter, but to send out emotion."¹² The poem starts with the line "Imprisoned by four walls" and ends with "I wrote messages, but received no reply"¹³ Within the sculptural installation, this comes across quite firmly with a sense of reaching out and desperation. Poetic physicality can be strongly seen and felt through Monika Grzymala's work, not just in the way that she works with the material, but through the audience's relationship with her work as well.

Chiharu Shiota is another artist whose work sits within the realms of poetic physicality. In Chiharu's case, she makes large scale immersive sculptural installations out of string. These installations, not only impressive physically, create symbolic and poetic environments. Her work is one to experience, "ask[ing for] our mental and bodily participation."¹⁴ Her work holds presence in a room, it is immersive and allows the audience to fully embody, walk around and take the piece in. Her piece *The Key in the Hand*, presented at the 2015 Venice Biennale, had a particularly interesting public engagement. *The Key in the Hand*, was composed of 50,000 hanging keys, collected from different people around the world, hanging out and over two boats¹⁵. Keys are everyday objects yet are valuable, holding safe the things we care about. Being keys from different members of the public, the keys become quite symbolic; each key embedded with memory of being used, connecting back to someone's life. When all of these keys come together it goes from this individual history to being a part of a collective memory, which can be felt in its presence by the viewer. Keys being able to open doors connects us also to this idea of open opportunities and belonging, as well as reminding us of the things that we hold close. The boats link us to the title '*The Key in the hand*' as they are there to hold the memories, as if they are hands that would catch the rain.¹⁶ The open palm-like gesture speaks to feelings of hopefulness and the lines speak to connections and memory. The thread in itself is also significant; in this work, Chiharu Shiota has used a red coloured thread which she associates to blood, life and therefore to human connections and relations¹⁷. In other works, she uses black thread to represent an absence and loneliness. Through her use of representation and creating physically and emotionally engaging installations, her work relates to poetic physicality.

Martin Boyce is another installation artist whose work is in accordance with poetic physicality. This is due to the poetic landscapes he constructs, that hold a conceptual,

¹²Ingibjörg Jónsdóttir, 'Monika Grzymala: Envoi', Reykjavík Art Museum, 16 December 2015, <https://artmuseum.is/exhibitions/monika-grzymala-envoi>.

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ 'Kooness', 'Chiharu Shiota, The Sensation Of Memory'. Kooness Magazine, accessed 17 June 2021, <https://www.kooness.com/posts/magazine/chiharu-shiota-the-sensation-of-memory>.

¹⁵ 'Chiharu Shiota's Key and Yarn Labyrinth for Venice Art Biennale', Designboom magazine, 6 May 2015, <https://www.designboom.com/art/chiharu-shiota-venice-art-biennale-the-key-in-the-hand-05-06-2015/>.

¹⁶ 'THE KEY IN THE HAND - Japan - Biennale Arte 2015', Google Arts & Culture, accessed 17 June 2021, <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-key-in-the-hand/2wJSFJ9xCfj3Jw>.

¹⁷ 'Zara Sigglekow, 'Chiharu Shiota In Conversation with Zara Sigglekow', Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne', 18 October 2016, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/chiharu-shiota/>.

atmospheric quality. His titles are poetic in themselves; such as 'Do words have voices', 'Our love is like the flowers, the rain, the sea and the hours,' or simpler with words like 'petrified', 'frozen' or 'abandoned'. The relationship between the title and the work is fascinating, it spurs the imagination of the viewer connecting them and further pulling them into experiencing the work in the way it was intended, reinforcing the poetical understanding. It is this atmospheric quality which is most significant in Martin Boyce's work. For his solo show in Glasgow, *Our love is like flowers, the rain, the sea and the hours* he discusses his work in relation to the idea of utopias and creating a space for yourself. He explains, "I wanted to have that same feeling, of a space you might have occupied as a teenager, that place you find for yourself. Exterior spaces like a park at night. The kind of urban park, that gap between the city and the suburbs, or gaps inside the city¹⁸. There is a sense of stillness and nostalgia within the work; in this piece he constructed tree-like structures out of common lighting strips. It became an imaginative space, yet familiar at the same time. A similar atmospheric quality can be seen in his piece, *Light pours out* where there are lamps but no light, as well as an empty bed frame upturned. These familiar objects have things missing which invoke a sense of absence and melancholy within the viewer¹⁹. It is through these eerie poetic landscapes that his work sits within poetic physicality.

In summary, poetic physicality is about creating an immersive and physically embodied experience where the viewer feels the emotion which is conveyed through the work. In poetic physicality, artists use visual metaphors and representational objects to get their ideas across. The artists that have been presented, have shown poetic physicality through their work each in slightly different ways; through connecting to their emotions, using material agency and physicality, using poetics in the title and to inform their work. But most of all it is having work that invokes a physically emotive response, the conceptual visual language is understood, and creates a poetic experience for the viewer to enjoy.

¹⁸ Evi Baniotopoulou, 'From 'Our Love Is Like the Flowers, the Rain, the Sea and the Hours', Tate, 2010, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/boyce-from-our-love-is-like-the-flowers-the-rain-the-sea-and-the-hours-t12132>.

¹⁹ 'A Conversation with Martin Boyce', Berlin Art Link, 2 November 2018, <https://www.berlinartlink.com/2018/11/02/the-light-pours-out-a-conversation-with-martin-boyce/>.

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