

SMALL GESTURES, HIGH VOLTAGE

A modest pile of volcanic stones lies heaped upon a few bits and pieces of illuminated neon whose warm light suggests glowing embers. This rudimentary illusion is briskly dispersed, however, by the length of grey cable that is coiled loosely around the ersatz campfire, eventually snaking off into a nearby electrical socket. A circle of eleven thin animal bones, abutting end to end, is suspended in mid-air just above ground-level, each delicately balanced bone hanging from the ceiling on a pair of extremely distended pale elastic bands. A stack of a dozen salvaged window fans, each separated from its neighbours by thin steel rods piercing the corners of the units, constitutes a makeshift column stretching from floor to ceiling, activated by an alternating wind current. So far as I know, the three sculptures by Nina Canell thus briefly described, which were produced at different moments over the past five years, have never been shown together. The point is worth making in light of the evident care with which Canell orchestrates the specific configurations of individual works she chooses to install in solo and group exhibitions, however disarticulated such configurations might initially appear. This scrupulousness exceeds the minimal expectation we might have of any artist that she attend with some subtlety to questions of juxtaposition and aggregation, both formal and semantic, to the point where the very concepts of contiguity and circuitry, of proximity and radiance, become thematised, and their metaphoric potential released. As the foregoing descriptions of the works respectively titled *Bag of Bones*, 2007, *Mutual Leap (After Nollét)*, 2008, and *Endless Column (Alternating Current for Twelve Window Fans)*, 2009, attest this is evident at the level of the individual sculpture as well as that of the sculptural ensemble. In this regard Canell's work as a whole may be seen as a natural response to an age in which, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued, traditional bonds and permanent attachments have largely been replaced by a propensity to form temporary connections and networks that 'need only to be loosely tied, so that they can be untied again, with little delay, when the settings change - as in liquid modernity they surely will, over and over again.'¹

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Bauman's positing of a state of endemic uncertainty in the world at large has been given a local inflection in certain accounts of contemporary art. In his recent essay, 'Precarious', Hal Foster notes the paradox that 'precariousness seems almost constitutive of much art [of the past decade], yet sometimes in a manner that transforms this debilitating affliction into a compelling appeal.' He goes on to note that 'this mimesis of precariousness is often staged in performative installations.' Drawing on T.J. Clark's account of the modernist project, Foster argues that what crucially distinguishes the recent art that interests him most from modernist practices of negation, which were developed in response to the relativities and contradictions of an earlier age, is that rather than resulting in 'a making over of formlessness into form' such art prefers to 'let that formlessness be', the better to evoke the instabilities of our day.² Canell's concern with what she opts to call the 'destabilisation of form' is reflected in her persistent deployment of the repurposed detritus of the recent past, such as outworn domestic utensils, redundant electrical equipment and discarded off-cuts of sundry building materials, in the seemingly ramshackle construction of many of her individual sculptures and sculptural installations.³ (Some installations have incorporated an explicit performative element, such as *Sea Chant*, 2006, and *C Chant*, 2007, both of which were produced in conjunction with her frequent collaborator Robin Watkins). What is particular to her work is an increasing preoccupation with contingency and mutability, with the unpredictable and unstable relations between objects and events, things and processes, especially as such relations develop or reverberate over time. In fact the passage of time is inscribed in the work in such myriad ways that her oeuvre might be read as an ever more ramifying response to the rhetorical question posed by W.G. Sebald in his novel *Austerlitz*: 'In what way do objects immersed in time differ from those left untouched by it?'⁴

*Soon you will and soon all have
forgotten things will have all things,
forgotten you. ORIGINALLY PRINTED
ON THE OCCASION OF *Soon you will
have forgotten all things, and soon
all things will have forgotten you.**

Canell regards all of her sculptures as in some respect 'dura-tional'. The temporal aspect of even the most ostensibly static of her sculptures is registered in the evidence it manifests of its protracted preparatory stages, i.e. the intermittent accumulation and consideration of its constituent elements. The reconditioned materials and objects from which Canell forges her sculptures generally bear the traces and accretions of their previous existence and attest the memory of their original purpose. Yet even when she chooses to work with newly forged rather than found material time tends to be equally, if more subtly implicated. A case in point is her characteristic use of and attitude toward neon, a century-old material somewhat past its prime, but whose appellation, at least, remains redolent of 'newness', derived as it is from the Greek *neos*, 'new'. Whereas the store-bought fluorescent tubes of Dan Flavin, for example, were always intended to appear as fresh as the day they emerged from the manufacturer's packaging, Canell's custom-made neon filaments in contrast tend to worm along the ground and slither over objects (e.g. *Soft Stone*, 2009) or droop from on high as if suffering from some preconditioned fatigue (e.g. *Winter Sun, Sleepy Tongue*, 2007). Many of these works literally 'fall into shape' as the carefully heated filaments take on the contours of pre-existing objects they are draped over. Though newly fabricated these works' newness is deliberately underplayed, if not disavowed. In the case of *Tapetum Lucidum (Blue Gas No.1)*, 2009, its short sections of neon are stitched together into a multicoloured tapestry that resembles, not so much the elaborately devised and meticulously produced art work that it is, as a patchwork of remnants gleaned from the workshop floor, requiring an unruly cascade of cables in order to function. This work was created from hundreds of off-cuts of glass tubes, which were heated and fused together with gas. While its form and facture recall a rag-rug, its title, which literally means 'bright tapestry', refers to the thin layer of tissue on the eye that produces eyeshine. If the implied equation between nerve threads and threads of wool here suggests a blurring of the boundaries between nature and culture, certain other sculp-

tures by Canell look embarrassed by the very fact that they are manmade. Rather than revel in its nature as artefact, the neon tube in *Dead Heat*, 2008, for instance, attempts to camouflage that fact by cosying up to Nature itself, in the form of the broken-off twig lying beside it whose shape it imperfectly apes.

The labour-intensive, time-consuming facture of *Tapetum Lucidum* is underscored by its telling list of constituent parts: ‘34 neon tubes made out of 237 individual pieces, string, cable, 31000v.’ Canell’s habit of including in the description of such a sculpture’s materials the voltage required to bring it to life is reminiscent of Rirkrit Tiravanija’s tendency to include ‘lots of people’ in accounts of many of his works. In both cases, we are expressly reminded of a significant constituent in a work’s makeup we might otherwise be apt to forget. To draw attention to the voltage required to power a neon sculpture is to remind the viewer of the essentially kinetic nature of all works employing neon, however immobile they might appear, in that they necessarily involve a constant flow of electricity between two electrodes. Of course, if we push this matter further we may be forced to concede that even the most antique monument or implacable minimalist monolith is, at a subatomic level, alive with spinning electrons, so that it is difficult, if not impossible to conceive of an object that is not, in one sense at least, to recall Sebald’s phrase, ‘immersed in time’. This might be a banal enough observation were it not for the fact that one of the more enduring barriers to a full understanding of the world around us is our inherent difficulty in truly perceiving its thoroughgoing dynamic nature. This, by all accounts, is as true of the layperson’s intuitive comprehension of her or his physical environment as it has been of physicists’ attempts to model the universe. Canell’s attempt to emphasise the complex, if not inscrutable nature of temporal duration and spatial orientation, and the relations between them, is especially evident in those works which, as she puts it, ‘operate in the borderlands of perception’. Such works serve to remind us that an unremarkable volume of ‘empty air’ may also be replete with invisible activity.

Canell’s expanded and (quite literally) expanding conception of sculpture as ‘an unfixed, durational phenomenon’ is most insistently reflected in her assiduous investigations of the sculptural possibilities and properties of such recalcitrant materials as sound, light, water, steam and electromagnetism. While some of her works incorporate an overt musical element many more of them are combined in configurations in which particular works hum or drone so that the exhibition space is infused by sound, though sometimes at a level that is barely audible. The sound reverberating through certain installations has on occasion been complemented by the inclusion of one or more of Canell’s ‘evaporation works’, which produce clouds of steam rising from buckets and basins of water fitted with mist machines (e.g. *The Case of the Homesick Cattle*, 2007) or from a small hole in the gallery floor under which a water-container, mist machine and fan have been placed (e.g. *Mist Mouth*, 2007). That these mist machines operate on the basis of ultrasonic vibrations draws attention to the parallels and overlaps between the forms of movement proper to gas, sound, and water as well as other waveforms. The invisible spectrum of various types of electromagnetism is of equal interest to Canell, for whom the border between the tangible and the intangible is permeable and constantly shifting. This confounding of stability, or what Canell prefers to call ‘the denial of finished or finite form’, is especially evident in the work that formed the centerpiece of a recent exhibition at the Hamburg Kunstverein, *Perpetuum Mobile (2400 KG)*, 2009, which used sound to turn water into vapour. In this instance the transformative, shape-shifting nature of the evaporation works in general was complemented by a process of solidification in the form of a stack of open cement sacks, which slowly became affected by moisture throughout the course of the exhibition. The contrast between the contemporaneous processes of solidification and dissolution, of taking shape and losing form, results in a work that confounds linear temporality while remaining resolutely mired in time.

Canell's interest in various types of waveforms points to the growing significance of the notion of 'radiance' to her work. Noting that Sir William Crookes (1832-1919), the chemist and spiritualist who invented the cathode ray, spoke of a fourth state of matter, in addition to solid, liquid and gaseous, which he termed 'radiant' - she glosses her own elaboration of the concept as follows: 'I have applied this idea of radiance as a sculptural, relational component - opening up the meaning to include any type of fluctuation. In this sense, radiation can slip human perception but nevertheless reach out and fill the space between objects and bodies.' When she refers on another occasion to the 'bonds which exist outside of human perception' this serves to remind us that the loosening of traditional bonds described by the social scientist Zygmunt Bauman as an aspect of contemporary life might be contrasted with enhanced notions of connectedness developed within the physical sciences, or indeed within the overarching domain of the environmental sciences.

The metaphorically suggestive nature of much of Canell's commentary on her works can be amplified by a consideration of the titles they bear, as well as certain sparks relayed between them. The morbid, if not macabre connotations of the phrase *Bag of Bones*, for example, gain added resonance from the knowledge that the collection of volcanic rocks in the sculpture to which it refers were originally gathered from the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, while the peculiar weightlessness of volcanic stones lends them a ghostly air. The phrase *Bag of Bones* also, however, gestures toward those other works by Canell in which bones literally appear, such as *Mutual Leap (After Nollét)*. This work takes as its point of departure the eighteenth-century physicist Jean-Antoine Nollét's investigations into the conduction of electricity through different materials. Its title alludes specifically to a well-known experiment in which Nollét linked a kilometer-long row of some two hundred Carthusian monks with an iron wire and then sent an electric current through this chain

of unsuspecting bodies reportedly causing them to leap simultaneously into the air. Conduction, as in the movement of particles through a medium of transmission in electrical conduction, or the transfer of thermal energy through physical proximity in the conduction of heat, is a particularly resonant metaphor for various forms of engagement, togetherness and intimacy. The implied equation between the mischievously put-upon convocation of brothers in *Mutual Leap (After Nollét)* and that sculpture's ring of animal remains is enhanced by the realization that each bone, as Canell notes, 'due to its unique weight, requires a different length [of elastic] in order to hang level and in harmony with the rest'. The ghosts of Nollét's monks flag as a pressing concern that process of harmonization required to establish or sustain any community of individuals, however temporarily. In fact Canell has explicitly described this work as an attempt 'to merge my own interest in a synchronization of events and the push and pull between the individual and the communal.'

Much of Canell's work seems at once dilapidated and brimming with energy, lending it a certain dreamlike quality. Arresting or incongruous forms emerge through an extended process of creative inquiry and practical experimentation, bearing their share of manifest and latent meaning, and offering the possibility of multiple interpretations. In a late footnote to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud reminds us that 'at the bottom dreams are nothing other than a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of sleep. It is the dream work that creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming - the explanation of its peculiar nature.'⁵ Allusions abound in Canell's work, as well as the artist's attendant commentary on it, to sleep, to daydreaming and to the oneiric haze of various forms of semi-repose. Her two solo exhibitions to date at Mother's Tankstation, her Dublin gallery, were, for example, titled *We Woke Up with Energy*,

THE LEYDEN JAR WAS AN EARLY TYPE OF BATTERY WHICH STORED STATIC ELECTRICITY IN METAL COATED WATER BOTTLES. IT WAS USED IN EARLY ELECTRICAL EXPERIMENTS (INCLUDING NOLLÉT'S). PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBIN WATKINS, TEYLERS MUSEUM, HAARLEM, 2009.

2006, and *Slight Heat of the Eyelid*, 2008. This is hardly coincidental. It suggests an attitude to the practice of sculpture comparable to dreaming, a productive working through of concerns that are common but fundamental, driven by a logic than can often seem elusive, and yielding multivalent symbolic forms that may be surprising or inscrutable but are nonetheless meaningful. The implied equation noted earlier between threads of wool and nerve threads in *Tapetum Lucidum (Blue Gas No.1)* might be elaborated to accommodate metaphorical ‘threads of thought’, suggesting the kind of bemusing traffic between material fact and mental processing once described by Virginia Woolf: ‘*Looked at again and again, half-consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it.*’⁶ There is in much of Canell’s work a highly productive interplay between the manipulation of solid matter, the workings of creative consciousness, and the dream-logic that governs the effusions of the apparently dormant mind.

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Polity, Cambridge, 2003, p. vii.

² Hal Foster, ‘Precarious’, *Artforum*, December 2009, pp. 207-9, p. 260.

³ All comments attributed to the artist, unless otherwise indicated, are from a series of emails to the writer in November 2009.

⁴ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by A. Bell, Vintage, London, p. 141.

⁵ S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by James Strachey, edited by Angela Richards, The Penguin Freud Library vol. 4, London, p. 650.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Solid Objects*, in *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, Oxford University Press, p. 56.