

Nina Canell by CCS Bard

"In a failed system new systems have space to grow."



Nina Canell. *Perpetuum Mobile* (25 kg), 2009, basin, water, cement, and ultrasound. Photo by Robin Watkins. All images courtesy of the artist, Daniel Marzona, Mother's Tankstation, and Galerie Barbara Wien.

Graduates of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College and program director Paul O'Neill speak with artist Nina Canell on the occasion of her recent international exhibitions.

For Nina Canell, sculpture is a condition. Grounded as much in the chance encounter as in close study, her work places material forms and immaterial forces in proximity, whereby each shapes the other, allowing dynamic relations to emerge. The resulting circuits of things and substances, along with their attendant poetic and linguistic associations, prioritize the generative nature of the interruption, glitch, or noisy signal.

Some works, employing thermodynamics and the alchemical, transmute physical forms, like altering the color of a copper rod with heat or solidifying a bag of powdered concrete with percolated vapor. Others physicalize the intangible, locating communication, for example, in a subterranean cable. Evident in each of these approaches is an understanding of matter as process, whereby things remain in a state of flux vulnerable to both internal and external shifts.

Canell's work was recently shown in three concurrent, while contextually divergent, group exhibitions: *Life Itself* at Moderna Museet, Stockholm; *FLUXESFEVERFUTURESFICION* at Azkuna Zentroa, Bilbao; and *Accrochage* (on view through November 2016) at Punta Della Dogana, Venice.

Alexis Wilkinson

We'd like to ask about the nature of your material process. Do you make objects?

Nina Canell

I'd like to turn your sentence around and say the nature of process *is* the material of my work, in the sense that I don't really make objects, but rather work in a syntax of relations and transfers. I think about sculpture as something that is grounded in material and objects, but is, at the same time, external to them.

Someone once said that they thought of my practice as an anthropology of energy, which is a comment I like. If the sculptural object acts as a carrier of movement or vibration conducted through it, then it doesn't really have a singular fixed materiality of its own, as it relies on a flexible relation to an immaterial circularity that is equally sculptural. You know what I mean? In a way, sculpture is sensitive to a condition, or perhaps sculpture is a condition? Something that can be conditioned that can, in turn, condition things.



Thins, 2015, nails and magnets. Photo by Robin Watkins.

Laura Herman

I know you do a lot of research into scientific histories, but I also know you sometimes come across materials randomly and take them into your studio. Can you speak to these different approaches to making work?

NC

It's a combination of reading and finding, as you suggest. There's no single methodology. Living mixes with practice, and research—whether it's electrochemical research pamphlets, prose, or novels—is often driven by certain material findings. And perhaps my process has changed slightly. I used to grab anything I found remotely interesting and keep these objects in my studio until they started to speak to each other. But this can be incredibly space and energy consuming. I try to balance the two approaches though—the imagination of a work is different to the work in actuality, and one can run the risk of losing the spirit of the unexpected encounter that can take place.

In terms of my specific research into scientific histories, I was always drawn to the empirical nature of chance meetings or happenings out of the experimenter or author's control—the more unintentional findings that were the basis for something else. The theory, so to speak, is less interesting than the moment of finding.

Emma James

Chemistry is a recurrent theme in your work, as it emerges in your practice both literally and metaphorically. This alchemic and poetic interchange reminds us of love.

BOMB



Installation view of *Stray Warmings*, 2013, heated copper, glass, and brick. Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis. Photo by Robin Watkins.

LH

We've read, for instance, the [review](#) Sheila Dickinson wrote of *Stray Warmings*, your 2013 exhibition at Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis, in which she describes your practice as being about love. We're curious to know how you felt about that reading?

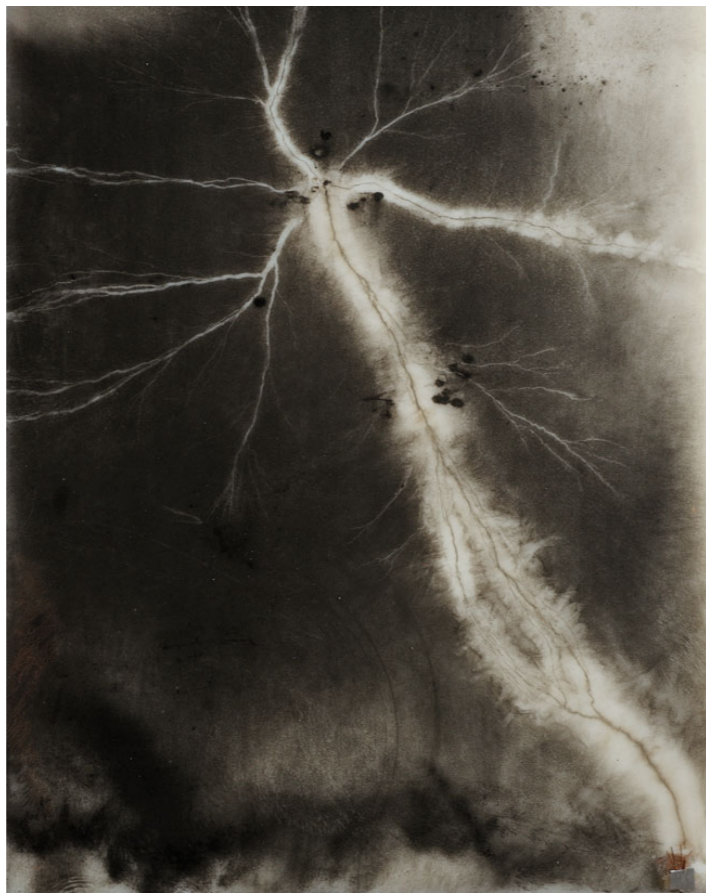
NC

It's such an unexpected, though intriguing, reading of the exhibition. I was using copper a lot, and I intentionally wanted an overwhelming saturation of warmth, so I used heat, which caused the copper to blush and transform. At the time, I was interested in a quotation I picked up from Michael Taussig's book *What Color is the Sacred*. He says, "Nothing could be further from the notion that first there are forms and then we have color lying on top as a cover or a jacket. If anything, it is the other way around."

I don't know if that answers the question about love. (*laughter*) But maybe this reading isn't as far-fetched as it initially felt, considering that my work involves various forms of radiation, electroluminescence, cables, and electricity that are of course full of symbolism and associations to forms of affection. There was also a frequency generator in the exhibition that constantly played an inaudible, high-pitched tone, which could perhaps pass for a love song in insect society.

Paul O'Neill

Many of your works set up relationships or relations between things, elements, materials, and also between people. But these relations appear to mediate dense, expansive, polyphonic aesthetic forms, and like a scientific model or a dynamical system used to describe the swinging of a clock pendulum or the flow of water in a pipe, or the number of fish that appear each spring in a lake, there appears to be some kind of rule that describes a specific material process. And like any material process or dynamical system, there will always be small shifts or noticeable alterations to the state of the current system that is perpetually evolving. As such, I believe many of your works also function in this kind of systemic way and that they appear to be somewhat self-deterministic, occupying a kind of state of stability, while also suggesting a kind of movement or future state that will systematically flow from one to another. Could you talk a little bit about these dynamical systems in your process?



Nina Canell and Robin Watkins, *Near Here (1 Microsecond)*, 2014, photocopy toner, nylon, perspex, fitted carpet, and electrical discharge.

NC

I may be more interested in interchanging states than systems per se, in the sense that I prefer to follow a form where it leads me, rather than determine its path. Once a work is complete it's perhaps a kind of open-ended sequence that by the very nature of its loose seams is more failed than functioning—and in a failed system new systems have space to grow. The evolving third space that occurs in between objects or in the glitch between "systems" can perhaps be described as a kind of self-propelled resonance. With resonance a sequence is hazy and the system is morphed over time as elements touch in the distance. This also makes me think about the resonance between form and thinking, and how this affinity between material and mental processes operates in sequentially, yet irrationally free-form ways. I'm drawn to something that evolves in terms of form and that feels as if it pertains to the syntax of thought, since thought is always too restless to be confident in a form that is completely without hesitation or friction.

Staci Bu Shea

Thinking about the body of the visitor encountering your work—such as in the case of *Passage (Saturated)* (2012), a work that increases the amount of oxygen available in a passageway, or *Perpetuum Mobile (40kg)* (2009), where a misting bowl of water slowly solidifies a bag of concrete—what position do you believe the visitor holds in relation to the works' self-contained ecologies? As bodies both exude and absorb matter within these systems and spaces, is the visiting body an intrusion upon a set of preexisting relationships or an inseparable component?

NC

While I don't think so much about the visitor's body within the space, the visitor does act as a kind of inseparable component of the work. The visitor completes and fulfills the work—imagines it. On some occasions the visiting body has intruded in a very welcoming manner, such as in the case of the *Into the Eyes As Ends of Hair*, at Cubitt (London), whereby the work accidentally picked up the electrical impulse of their doorbell through the extended antenna of an FM receiver, which caused an audible spark in the space.

AW

Following this, and thinking also of the role of elements being in relationship with each other in the work, we're curious if you believe there is a suggestion of an ethics of "relating to" or "being with" at play here.



Mid-Sentence, 2014, subterranean communication cable, steel, concrete. Photo by Marcus Leith.

NC

I would say "being with" and "relating to" are integral to processes of making and how messages transpire, at least indirectly, in the work I make. More specifically, the dissolution of physical proximity and embodiment of widening relational patterns are explored in more direct ways in the cable works of *Mid-Sentence* (2014). At large, much of the work comes into being by relating different processes, objects, and associations—a word, a stray sock, and so forth. The way that concepts become entangled through their relation to objects and processes might suggest something akin to a methodology, which I denied having earlier.

LH

In *Mid-Sentence* and *Shedding Sheaths* (2015), you present cut-off pieces of subterranean and undersea cables. What is it about these material remnants of immaterial communication systems that appeals to you?

NC

Cables have been a part of my work for a long time now, though they haven't really been center stage in the way they are in these installations. The first time I looked at a cross section of telephone cable, I was struck by its unsentimental muteness. When you cut a cable, you find nothing but this incredible, engineered symmetry. As leftovers of our extended nervous system, I'm interested in how memory is stored, or not stored, in systems like these.

This "first" cable was dug up on the street where I live in Berlin. Robin, my partner and frequent collaborator, saw it. He phoned me and said, "You have to come home and look at this." He tried, initially, to discreetly acquire it, but that didn't work because it's common for people to try to steal cables in order to recycle and sell the copper. In spite of him having a baby in one arm and a stroller in another, he was still a suspect. So I came along and asked the man who was doing the digging if I could have a piece. I told him my motive: "I'm an artist, and I'm really interested in what you're doing here. Could you please simply cut me a little piece?" And he cut me such a small, *small* piece. It made me look at cables in such a different way, in terms of how it really serves to undermine all our ideas about electricity and communication as this fluid, linear thing. Instead, all that was left was this kind of sausage and an arcane emptiness.

Since that time, I have taken a lot of interest in the historical and economical significance of these infrastructures. Writer Nicole Starosielski suggests we look at these cables as part of the environment—places where capital, labor, and knowledge have sunk into the Earth's surface.

Christian Camacho-Light

A quotation by the philosopher of science Michel Serres appears in several catalogues of your work. Serres writes, "Systems work because they don't work... the relation is a non-relation." We understand this to mean that language necessarily exceeds the systems of mediation which support it, and that communication is always accompanied by a system failure. Considering this, how does mediation operate within your own work?

NC

I read this quotation as a description of the specifics of a cable cut, as the embodiment of a slice of non-relation. It made me aware of the fact that the cables are often thought of as arcane, or simply not thought about at all, until they fail to operate. Like fresh air, electricity, water, Internet—something that we expect to have in an uninterrupted supply—mediation is often positively portrayed as a lossless flow, as something that simply is, and so the infrastructure of it all is consequently not there. The loss of smoothness helps me think of how mediation could operate in my own work and art in general, such as poetry or music, and how it makes for such meaningful modes of transmission. A perfectly sent or received signal doesn't leave anything unanswered or uncertain. But I think this uncertainty or noise to the signal are the building blocks of making art.

PON

Could you expand a little bit further on this idea of the glitch, or the splice or split? Or this kind of dialectic that you're suggesting within both your understanding of accumulated investment in relation to capital, but also the economy of relationality, or non-relations, in terms of art's production? I'm thinking here of the glitch as part of a larger system of communication, or a larger relational network or infrastructure. What your work sometimes appears to be doing is suggesting a kind of precarity or fragility between the relationality of the small part to the larger infrastructural network, system, or structure. What do you believe is the role of the glitch, if you were to describe your work as a series of glitches or as suggesting that there may be some kind of glitch within a larger system that can be made apparent from the position of art's critique of cultural capital? What's the relationship between the smallness as part of a larger system, and the glitch within that system or infrastructure?

NC

If you take the glitch as a physical bit of a larger network of cable, for example, then it's a way to approach something unthinkable or unimaginable. This glitch articulates an increment of distance that connects yet separates, and precariously so, since it has itself been cut from a material circuit. The bit does not function without the context of the larger circuit, and likewise the larger circuit depends on the interruption, that is the cable. In terms of the glitch, splice, and split between cultural capital and cables, it's perhaps worth mentioning a work I made in 2009–2010, when I was commissioned by a collective of ten collectors with the premise that the work could be shared. Instead of making a physical object or edition, a synchronized blackout in ten geographically disparate households was triggered remotely by myself without prior announcement once each month for the duration of twelve calendar months.

LH

I have a question about the artist book you produced with Robin Watkins, *Mid-Sentence*, where you show the cross sections of many different cables. While these cuts refer to their relation to larger systems, the artist book itself appears more as a taxonomy of cables. Each of these cables are different and act as abstractions or diagrams. Could you speak to the difference between these representations and the physical objects which are experientially quite different?

NC

All of the images in the book are found technical drawings taken from manuals, blueprints, and product PDFs—though sometimes they had to be cleaned up a bit or traced due to resolution issues. These purely technical descriptions of cable interiors became a space where we could open up an interrupted yet coherent sequence of texts—both found and written fragments—concerning words and energy, communication and distance, absence and presence, and the forgetfulness of cables. It ended up sort of taxonomic, as you say, and yes, they’re incredibly different from experiencing the physical work. Those stumps have clearly lived, having been part of soil or sea.

EJ

What happens when you take this very technical diagram out of the technical context, then place it in an exhibition and in an art context?

NC

The book was not produced to be exhibited, though it has been since. Rather, it was meant to be a kind of appendix for an exhibition I made at Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Something I found amusing was that so many people commented that these drawings reminded them of the work of Hilma af Klint, an esoteric Swedish painter from the last century. Her work is composed of all these very strong, powerful, universal shapes and forms, which are actually evident in the cross section of the cable. What’s amusing is that all of her paintings are about communication, about communicating with nature, or gods and spirits. They function as a kind of séance or medium. And here, we’re thinking about the cable as a kind of medium. And this is what happens when you turn around and look at the cable as an image, as shapes and forms rather than functional objects.

EJ

That’s interesting as well because Klint anticipated that her work wouldn’t be appreciated or that people wouldn’t be ready to see it until a hundred years after she made it.

NC

That’s right! (*laughter*) Also, of course, she worked during the heyday of electricity taming, and so there was this urge to interpret these forces in images. So our work is perhaps closer than one thinks in terms of subject matter as well, whether we talk about spirits or about electricity.

PON

I have a question about the difference between thinking about a singular work, and the kind of dynamical relations internal to a single work, and what happens to that single work when it’s recontextualized within the context of a larger circuitry of juxtapositional systems of communication, such as a group exhibition. What happens to that internal dynamical relation when you show a number of different works together in the context of a solo exhibition? I want to ask that specifically in relation to your most recent solo exhibition as well as the current/recent group shows you’re part of in Stockholm, Bilbao, and Venice.

NC

When you mention those three group exhibitions as examples, it really makes me reflect on how they are different to each other. I think, at best, art can have the capacity to identify influences that cut through a multitude of various, disparate circuits. The group exhibition at Moderna Museet, Stockholm is called *Life Itself* and asks quite bold questions about the mystery of life, pondering all the philosophical speculations that follow. The exhibition at Azkuna Zentroa in Bilbao titled *FLUXESFEVERFUTURESFICITION*, curated by Paris collective castillo/corrales, deals with the abstractions of contemporary political economy. I just returned from Accrochage at Punta Della Dogana in Venice, a show that deals with the minimal gesture of how the work was created, as opposed to why. I think that’s a good example of how group exhibitions can push the work to reveal different aspects of itself. Sometimes you feel like you can get cornered, in terms of curating, but the more I practice, the more I open up to that, and to how the work can change by context, or how it can transcend my intentions in some ways.

It’s always different to work on solo projects, as it gives you this amazing time to delve into a body of work. The internal dynamical relation of a work can change entirely—often an existing work that I think I know well suddenly turns out entirely different when placed in a room with newer or older works, for instance. A group of sculptures can become unexpectedly charged by a rearranged syntax, or a new articulation out of old ones might emerge. What I know is that I’m particularly good at being indecisive, which means that the installation moment can sometimes be like a continuation of the studio, so things can always be moved around or rearranged once or twice, or perhaps again, again or a little more.

Nina Canell lives and works in Berlin, Germany. She is currently preparing an exhibition at Museo Tamayo, Mexico City and solo exhibitions at Galerie Barbara Wien in Berlin and Leo Xu in Shanghai.