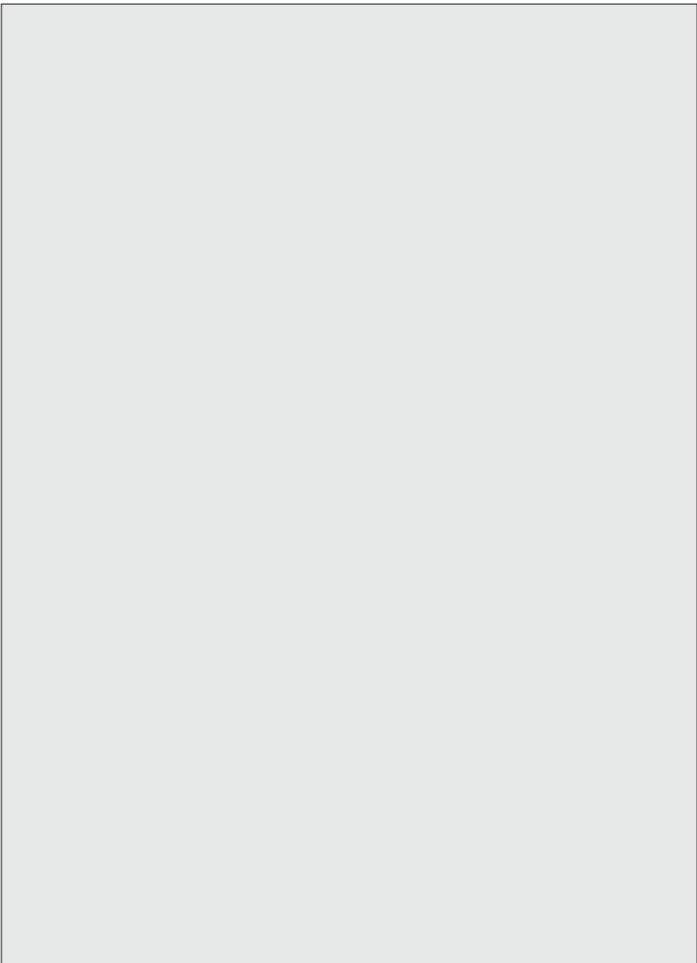
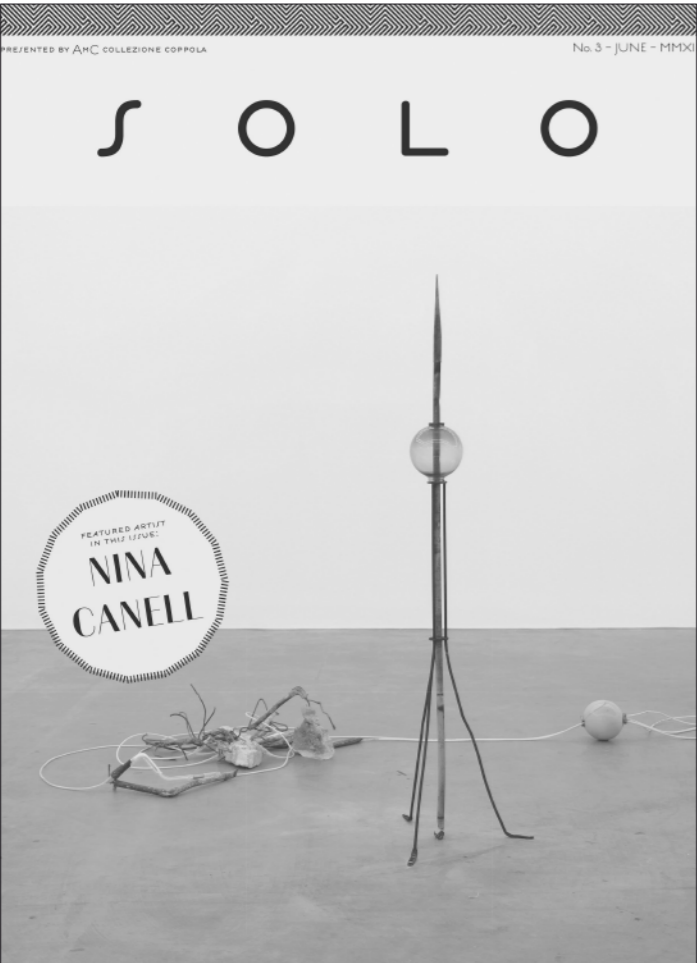


Every Distance Is Not Near (essay)
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EVERY DISTANCE IS NOT NEAR

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Today everything present is equally near and equally far. The distanceless prevails. But no abridging or abolishing of distances brings nearness.
Martin Heidegger, *The Thing* ¹

What is nearness? The question remains relevant in responding to the digital fatigue that increasingly conditions our time – constantly updated information, the flatness of visual compression and image production, ever widening abstractions of finance, the atomizing nature of networked communication – distanceless aesthetics have indeed come to dominate swaths of contemporary life. Experience is increasingly held as relations not matter, data flow over bodies, exchanges and transactions in place of things. The rhetorical promise of modernity to make knowledge commensurate with the visualized and surveyable is seemingly within grasp, taking place in screen time and space. The techno-fictions of symbol commerce and management part with the oddity of objects. Here, the pull of gravity is surpassed, the misshaped and imperfect tool drops from our hand. Lucidity glows in algorithms, desire is predictive, and connectivity replaces geography. But there are counter adages of time to be counted, other findings to be shown and named.

In many ways the work of Swedish artist Nina Canell acts directly against such distancelessness, prompting finely contoured lengths, shaped voids, and felt proximities. Nearness arises from her refusal of orthodox empiricism, borrowing trial and error modes of experimentation and re-tellings culled from scientific history but without fidelity or presumptive signification. For Canell, objects are not objects in and of themselves without reference to the human act of representing it. Fallible truths gather and circulate differently. A recent exhibition at Cubitt Gallery in London exemplifies how Canell’s embrace of analog technologies and organic and readymade materials enacts heightened moments of mutability, perceptual awareness, and deviant frequencies. Tethered to fragmented and often partially withheld narratives, Canell’s sculptural practice is comprised of choreographed indirection and relay. The exhibition title, *Into the Eyes as Ends of Hair*, for example, extends from a shortwave radio appended with fibrous wire, cable, and nails—a homespun antenna rising and wafting throughout the gallery as if it may exit and learn to live by its own rules at any moment. Set to search for incoming relays near Stuttgart, Germany,

the apparatus picks up the impudent charges and incidental sparks closer by, as if attuned to the volume and affective reality of the space itself.

Titled *Into the Eyes as Ends of Hair (III)*, 2012, this radio device meant to convey communiqués from afar is taken over by immediacy, just as an ascendant column of tuning forks, *Waver*, 2012, plunges into a gallery wall, attempting to call and respond to the volume of the room, the scansion of the radio transmitter, and the corporeal movement of viewing bodies. Rather than providing the accountable, Canell’s measuring is made strange. Oversensitivity prevails everywhere: paths get crossed, receiver becomes speaker and vice versa, messages stray into errant harmonies, and conductive functionality morphs into nerve endings. For *Telepath*, 2010, a neon tube coursing with 2000 volts is draped over copper piping of equal length propped and suspended in a corner of the gallery. Refusing to conform to each other, these units echo Marcel Duchamp’s Three Standard Stoppages, 1913-14, in their technical measure but variant appearance, one slumped over the other. And yet, taken from the Greek *tele-* (meaning “distance”) and *pathe-* (meaning “affliction” and “experience”), the sculpture is sibling to the other works, reaching out in its gesture of distance and contingency but also reliance and support. Like so many of Canell’s sculptural arrangements *Telepath* behaves as if afflicted—wired to be creature-like. Resting, the neon readies to strike or slither, bolt and coil in its implicit movement and dormant stance.

The modifying quality of Canell’s adapted devices and converted technologies is often wed to provisional research into previous experiments and moments of discovery or phenomenal encounter, introducing biographical episode and anecdote into the circuitry of her installations. *Of Air*, 2012, for instance, seals 3800mL of air taken from the preserved study of 19th century Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev in St. Petersburg, Russia. Placed like a specimen atop a finely crafted wooden table, the glass jar sits encased in a vitrine, ordering space through containing the absence of air transported. A token of belief sampled in the month of February, year 2012, Mendeleev’s air has been abducted as testament to intuited composition. Brought close to Canell’s other units of spatial measurement and corporeal attunement in the exhibition, *Of Air* acts as a sequestered agent, a captured breath that is also an object of fascination. Responding to the “ah-ha” moment of revelation ascribed to Mendeleev’s having the pattern of the periodic table of elements come to him in a dream, Canell and frequent collaborator Robin Watkins trailed their interest in this moment of aperception all the way to Russia and the studio that maintains the scientist’s desk, books and personal effects. As such, *Of Air* morphs initial curiosity into the most peculiar form of speculative evidence.

After several sleepless nights in 1869, so the legendary story goes, the pattern of the periodic table came clear only after Mendeleev fell asleep due to exhaustion. On the cusp of seeing the fruition of his arduous research, the scientist succumbs to his body only to then receive the unfolding image fully formed and realized. Taking its place alongside Newton’s apple and Archimede’s bathtub, Mendeleev’s intuited moment becomes an object of curiosity. But this is also the *Aha-Erlebnis* that Lacan refers to as the turning point of knowledge, as in the mirror stage of infancy where the waking self-consciousness of human life charts a path that gives anteriority to the future. A fervent moment that ushers in a forever-changed outlook onto the world, the epiphanic moment is received in time as anticipatory but often just below or to the side of consciousness. It is the moment of knowledge the Greeks called *noesis* that can arrive via the gift of sleep, for Mendeleev, or in the unexpected faculty of boredom. But Mendeleev’s vision exists also in praise of trial and error, for it is a residual emphasis that is transformed in *Of Air* where the moment of crossing into knowledge is not only an inspiration from a past era, but also a journey of homage made essential. In making such a specific emptiness, Canell’s bottled missive is both transparent and opaque.

This associates Duchamp once more and his readymade receptacle, *Air de Paris (50 cc of Paris Air)*, 1919, which he gave as a wry gift to his most steadfast American patron, Walter Arensberg. Duchamp’s void confirms the artist’s role as shape-shifter, an agent capable of narrativizing space and

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inverting language, making material existence pliant and paradoxical. As his phial included a label playfully reading "Serum Physiologique," Canell's specimen is appended by the contingency of Mendeleev's revelation. The "of air" attests to a prepositional condition that seizes upon protean subterfuge and restless modification. Carried across literal and figurative borders, the being-there of visiting Mendeleev's place of study is made manifest through nothing more than the atmosphere and mood of appellation.

The disposition of Canell's work emphasizes material and linguistic conversion in ways that bring to mind American philosopher William James' claim that we should not only accept prepositional modes as ways of understanding life and existence but also follow relational structures to develop new modes of knowledge and feeling. As he writes in a famous passage from *Principles of Psychology*:

But from our point of view both Intellectualists and Sensationalists are wrong. If there be such things as feelings at all, then so surely as relations between objects exist in *rerum natura*, and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known. There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. If we speak objectively, it is the real relations that appear revealed; if we speak subjectively, it is the stream of consciousness that matches each of them by an inward colouring of its own. In either case the relations are numberless, and no existing language is capable of doing justice to all their shades. We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue, a feeling of cold. Yet we do not, so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the substantive parts alone that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use.²

It is just such 'feelings of by' and 'feelings of if' that spring from Canell's imagination. From titling that creates expectations of inquiry and being alongside—the already discussed *Of Air, Into the Eyes as Ends of Hair*, but also *On Thirst: Buoy*, 2010, and *On Thirst: Bells*, 2010, among others—to the putting in motion and tracing of materiality via evaporation, containment, and magnetism, Canell is driven by transmutation. In *Perpetuum Mobile (2400 kg)*, 2009, the prepositional mode is made overtly kinetic as ultrasound waves generate rising steam from a steel bucket placed by a stack of exposed bags of cement. As the vapor releases into the exhibition space, the readymade units harden imperceptibly over days and weeks. The everywhere artifice of a most banal compound is transformed into chance stones to be questioned. Existing in different accumulations, *Perpetuum Mobile* materializes nearness and the influence of what surrounds us, and with humor in the mix as the wonder of a science experiment and the what if of play still slips into the mesmeric pace and appearance of the piece. Likewise, *Bag of Bones*, 2007, gives off the illusion of smoldering embers beneath a cluster of volcanic stones even as its pulse of customized neon is revealed in the chord running to the wall. Sleight of hand and illusion are laid bare to be turned over and dwelled upon in both their simplicity and the capacity to grab attention and suspend time. Again, nearness is the art of indirection.

The knotted joinery of *Black Light (For Ten Performers)*, 2010-11, brings together ten short pieces of cable removed from ten different households via tubing to form a multi-colored circuit. An object and remnant of imposing darkness for certain periods of time on ten households, the thingness of Canell's sculpture is accompanied by a contract outlining the agreement made between the artist and ten "performers" who are informed via letter only after the event has occurred exactly when the electricity was interrupted in their homes and for how long. The purportedly unending reserve of electricity, perhaps modernity's greatest illusion, is given a form via social contract. The transmission we are most reliant upon, electrical voltage and currency, is here a modest hoop. *Tapetum Lucidum (Blue Gas No.5)*, 2010, on the other hand, makes a bushel of its electrical support. Part of an on-

going series named in part after the tissue in many vertebrate animals that lies behind the retina and increases the light available in low light, Canell's series of ribbed wall sculptures glow like illuminated windows. Tubular filaments aligned horizontally revealing slight variations in color and luminosity while a gathering of wire and cable pools on the floor below.

Affinity Units, 2012, on the other hand, loops its cabling out along the floor, parceling out two excerpted bits of neon—one intersecting a bifurcated brick-like stone while the other adheres and travels atop the shape of a less symmetric rock. Propped nearby is the torque and bend of a heated piece of copper, miming the heat needed to bend the glass filament flickering close at hand. A similar mimesis across materiality characterizes the gestural pliancy of works like *Soft Stone*, and *Winter Work*, made in 2009, wherein neon light assumes the likeness of existing natural forms. Not invested in standards but affinities, Canell brings observation, perception, and materiality together to ask newly formed but timeless questions. As with her installation *The New Mineral*, 2009, at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, in Aachen, Germany, a stumbled upon desert artifact will take its place alongside a neon stone floor assembly and corner piece, *Heat Hang*, 2009, to create a circulation animated by reference to Jean-Antoine Nollét, an 18th century physicist and priest who reputedly had a group of monks from his abbey form a large circle and connect themselves via wire in order to receive a shock released from a Leyden jar, evincing the speed and seeming simultaneity of electricity. Affinities are extracted from history, from the earth, from chemistry, and travel, imbued with Canell's metaphoric sense of poetry.

With works like *Small Wave Telegram to an Empty Eye*, 2010, and *To Be Hidden And So Invisible (2100 Hz)*, 2009, closeness amplifies and makes heard the possible effects of drolly wiring fruit. Sculpture is process and form made visible, resonant, and durational as Canell often invokes air and sound as available and willing to communicate with onlookers. For *Uttermost Beat of the Heart*, 2011, it is the ringing of a bell held within a glass jar. Gradually exposed to air inside the vacuum form of the container, the ringing bell gains in volume over time as it is prompted by a low charge of electricity. Indeed, form is always shown to be hypersensitive, contingent to its surroundings, and ready to awake in Canell's world. As the great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam reminds us in his poem on what remains in, of, and for the phenomenal world, *He Who Finds a Horseshoe*, "The sound is still ringing, though what caused it is gone," and "Thrice blessed is he who puts a name in song." The world of elements, artifacts, and things retain life, only asleep in its many forms and frequencies:

The air is as deeply mingled as the earth;
You can't get out of it, and it's hard to get in.

Human lips
that have no more to say
keep the shape of the last word they said,
and the hand goes on feeling the full weight
even after the jug
has splashed itself half empty
on the way home.³

For Nina Canell, these distances of the prepositional and found are always composed of a specific nearness. Materiality is resolutely atavistic, ready to assert itself anew in the ongoing, attuned correspondence of her provisional empiricism.

1 Heidegger, Martin, from his 1950 essay "The Thing," translated by Albert Hofstadter in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper & Rowe, NY, 1972), p. 17
2 William James, *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1 (Dover Publications, 1950), p. 245
3 This version of *He Who Finds a Horseshoe*, written in 1923, appears in *The Selected Poemes of Osip Mandelstam*, translated by Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin (Atheneum, NY, 1983), p. 45-48

