

It is known how Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynic, quite simply refuted [the Eleatics'] arguments against movement; without speaking he rose and walked about, contradicting them by action. Hegel, *History of Philosophy*

## 1. AC

Long before French Fauvist Raoul Dufy started work on his monumental magnum opus *La Fée Électricité*, a giant painting created especially for the Electricity Pavilion of the 1937 Paris World's Fair, the popular cultural imagination had grown accustomed to viewing (and constructing) electricity as an essentially *feminine* phenomenon. This may have had something to do with the fact that, soon after the discovery of its essential properties and qualities, electricity had quickly (and much more easily than, say, water and gas) found itself 'domesticated,' that is to say applied to accommodate the demands of 'home' use—indeed, the late nineteenth-century revolution in electrical applications constituted an especially auspicious moment in this cultural history of the gendering of an essentially 'neutral' natural phenomenon, not in the least because the Victorian era as a whole was so obsessed with the question of gender, and with the 'problem'—like electricity, potentially destructive—of femininity in particular.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, *la fée électricité* was also conceived of as a fairy, female goddess or muse (rather than, say, as a gnome, knight, or priest)

electrical polarities, however, was the constant presence of a lethal *threat* hidden (or presumed to be hidden) in the folds of electricity's impenetrable cloak, one that required careful handling and ruthless disciplining: an indispensable source of heat, light, and life (see the famous Miller-Urey experiment on the origin of life on Earth) throughout all of human existence, electricity in both its 'natural' and 'artificial' forms also appeared early on as a frighteningly reliable bringer of death and destruction—a dichotomy equally prominent in many traditional representations of the fair sex throughout history. It is no coincidence then, that the vogue for *la-fée-électricité*-style

<sup>2</sup> Liquefaction here stands opposite the solid state of being that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously saw "melt into air" with the advent of modernity; as it so happens, Nina Canell, whose art is the instable subject (obliquely approached) of the current, equally instable essay, was invited in 2009 to participate in an exhibition named after Marx and Engels's celebrated assertion that, in the modern world, "all that is solid melts into air"—with a work composed of five blue *solids*. "Liquid modernity," furthermore, is Zygmunt Bauman's preferred formula for the present condition of the world; it would be interesting to further investigate the gendered overtones of these qualifications from the historical perspective (among other vantage points) of both the increased presence of women in the workplace—including *the scientific laboratory*—and the persistent tendency to gender 'work' (as both opposed and equal to 'action' and 'labor') as such.

depictions of the electromagnetic force, simultaneously quaint, cutesy and sexist, really only took flight at the exact moment when a host of enterprising, adventurous *savantes* (Marie Curie will probably forever remain the archetype in question; tellingly, she was also a pioneer of electro-physical research) began knocking on the hastily bolted doors of the traditionally male-dominated bulwark of scientific enquiry—a moment in history that also coincided, significantly, with the birth of psychoanalysis as a 'science' of sexual difference, and as such yet another chapter in the long history of men's suspicion of (and last-stand attempt at regaining control over) women's desire to 'know' as much as they did. And so, with the entry of *la fée électricité* into the mine-riddled arena of scientific research, began the long process of unbuttoning Pythagoras' trousers—an ongoing project in which certain important aspects of Nina Canell's work can equally be inscribed.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I am referring here to a 1995 book by the Australian scientist Margaret Wertheim titled *Pythagoras' Trousers: God, Physics, and the Gender Wars*. Published at the height of the so-called 'culture wars' that were then tearing apart much of American academic life, this important book continues to suffer from those exact gender wars it sought to expose as folded into the aforementioned culture wars: not surprisingly, most of the politically motivated savage criticism posted online on amazon.com was penned by men (whether they are also male scientists remains unknown).

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because the traditional graphic representation of electricity—as a stream, a current, flow or *fluidum*, a liquid state of becoming<sup>2</sup>—seemed to correspond so well with the supposedly 'feminine' qualities of softness, curvature, and, most importantly, caprice; it is no coincidence that the official aesthetic of the *belle époque*, an era enchanted with both the many marvels of electricity and various rebellious models of femininity (think of Ophelia and Salomé, of Sarah Bernhard and Mata Hari), was best expressed in the languorous floral motifs of *art nouveau*—as the French modernist *littérateur* Paul Morand put it: "Women are flowers with light bulbs. Flowers with light bulbs are women."

More important in this alignment of electricity and female agency, and quite unrelated to the bizarre scientific custom of distinguishing 'male' from 'female'

<sup>1</sup> In a neat twist of historical irony, it was the domestication of electricity – i.e. the entry of electricity into the private home – that also revolutionized the treatment of female hysteria: up till then, and in true nineteenth century fashion, hysteria had long been treated as a sexual affliction first and foremost, enabling the male medical authorities to subject their female patients to such unlikely 'cures' as manually administered pelvic or vaginal massage – it was an early electric invention already then named the vibrator which put an end to the aforementioned dubious 'medical' practices, thus marking one small step in women's struggle to regain control over their bodies, this one accomplished, quite improbably, *with the help of electricity*.

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Electricity, threat: I, for one, wholeheartedly admit to being scared of her (*la fée électricité*)—so as for me, Pythagoras’ trousers don’t quite fit. Luckily, I also no longer have gas heaters in my current living quarters—for much of my life, they were just as big a source of anxiety. [“Did I switch off the gas? Did I switch off the electrical stove?” The ensuing panic attacks would concern financial ruin just as much as personal well-being. The greatest fear, however, continues to surround the event of taking a bath while my wife is blow-drying her hair with the proper electrical appliance just a couple of feet away.] This anxiety is not so much related to the fact that gas serves as a painfully demonstrative reminder of my miserable continental European dependency upon Russian might in matters that concern natural resources (although the important notion of *circulation*, which—no pun intended—courses through much of Canell’s practice, is of course present in the acknowledgement of this dependency as well), as it is with the spectral presence of permanent threat or ‘risk’ in the supposedly safe privacy of our homes: there is electricity all around me, and there is electricity everywhere—how many miles of cables and wires does the average household contain, I often wonder, and how many meters of cabling went into the awesome apparatus of Canell’s *Shedding Skin (Perpetual Current for Twenty-Four Buckets)*?<sup>4</sup>—and this of course turns every home into a potential disaster area (every socket or loose-hanging cable can be the end of me), the control of which is a matter of both level-headed domestic management and social responsibility, a bit

<sup>4</sup> Cables, I must confess, have long been something of a personal obsession, and I of course responded rather enthusiastically to the fact that Canell seemed to share at least some aspects of my fascination for a material and/or technology both so anachronistically ‘analogue’ (or at least smacking of obsolescence) and timeless. In our daily tussles with miles of cables all around us, most notably those meant for charging mobile phones, laptops, iPods, and other disingenuous prophets of the illusion of an unfettered mobility, we sometimes resemble a twenty-first-century equivalent of the famous Laocoon sculpture group, caught in the stranglehold of a mythical sea serpent. Yet all the while these very same cables that in some way keep us bound to the ground are of course also channels designed to conduct the energy that makes movement possible in the first place. The profusion of wires, threads, cables, and other conductive or connective channels (or, more precisely, *symbols* of channeling) in Canell’s work points to this foundational aporia of stasis and motion, stillness and dynamism, begging the question whether ‘movement,’ in a philosophical sense, is possible at all (absolute stasis isn’t, as we all know: the absolute limit of 0 Kelvin or zero molecular motion only exists as a purely theoretical limit, i.e. requiring the existence of a thermodynamic system wholly disconnected from the universe). More importantly, however, the ubiquity of wiring in Canell’s work also echoes the reticular model of neural traffic, i.e. of *thinking* as such. The wire, charged or not, that connects A to B to Y to Z symbolizes both the ceaseless circulation of energies, forces, and values of all kinds, as well as the erratic, associative path ‘followed’ (or rather, traced) by all creative thinking, which is only ever chronologically linear.

like the quotidian hazard that is traffic. So when Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, commenting upon Canell’s habit of including the voltage required to bring to life her electro-installations in the descriptions that accompany these installations’ titles, states that “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,” I can’t help but think: 2000V (in *Nerve Variation*), 3000V (in *Bag of Bones*), 31000V (in the most complex *Tapetum Lucidum*) are all demonstrably lethal voltages<sup>5</sup>—a frankly literal staging of the aesthetic effect of *real* ‘precariousness’ (or of the ‘aesthetic of risk’) that clearly sets Canell’s work apart from the *mimesis* of precariousness that is such a pervasive characteristic of many contemporary art installations.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Researching this article, I found out that most electrical chairs in the American prison system operated dispensing 2000V charges; interestingly—to continue the feminist tone of the introductory paragraph of the present essay—I also found out that some of America’s most notorious frying chairs were given *female* nicknames.

<sup>6</sup> See Hal Foster, “Precarious,” in *Artforum*, December 2009. Both quoted from Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, “Small Gestures, High Voltage,” in Melanie Bono, Annette Hans (eds.), *Nina Canell, Evaporation Essays*, Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 2010

## 2. DC

The precarious balance of an agreed-upon risk and its contractual negotiation on the one hand, and circulation, the ghost of traffic, on the other: while even the most cursory glance at Canell’s oeuvre to date is certain to reveal a myriad of circles and circular figures as persistent atavistic tropes (from the suspended ring of bones in *Mutual Leap* via the buckets and drumheads in *Perpetuum Mobile* and *Shedding Skin* to the snaking coils of cable in *Bag of Bones*, echoing life’s cyclical nature as much as the limitless flow of energy), the circle-of-trust-like logic of the contract is literalized most comprehensively in one of Canell’s least material projects to date, *Black Light (For Ten Performers)*. The ten performers referred to in the title are in fact private collectors, participants in a work of Canell’s that involved the temporary removal of a tiny piece of electric cable from their respective households—a symbolic incision meant to douse their homes in complete darkness for prescribed lengths of time (thanks to a remotely controlled electric timer, the installation of which was also stipulated in the ‘contract’). In addition to this choreographed ‘event,’ *Black Light* also consists of a sculptural element: a perfect circle made up of the ten pieces of electric cable that the performers so generously excised from their domestic grids, laid down on the floor and connected to each other using phosphorescent shrink tube—of a kind that allows the joints of the ring to light up in the dark, like a hovering halo of bits and bytes flashing through a tunnel of thought, or a crude graphic representation, perhaps,

of hadrons colliding. Countless circles already litter the annals of art history, and, like the odd cyclotron before it, CERN’s Large Hadron Collider will doubtlessly continue to inspire underwhelming artworks for a long time to come, yet few works manage to conflate the interlocking narratives of circularity, currency, and the social contract so successfully and with such exemplary economy of symbolic means as Canell’s understated blackout.<sup>7</sup> In addition to revealing the essentially *social* (hence contractual) dimension of man’s harnessing the brute force of nature’s many mysterious energies, as well as exposing the economic scaffolding thanks to which this management is made possible—the performers *are* collectors after all: men of money or more-than-average economic means (we presume), and it is hard not to think of the artist’s instruction to intervene in the flows of energy coursing through their homes as an oblique comment on the deregulated flow of global capital, the true life-blood of the international art market that, in some sense, has brought Nina Canell and me together—*Black Light* also reaffirms our emphasis on the transformative process, circular or not, of conduction and transmission as Canell’s great ‘theme.’ In this sense, *Black Light* and its apparent mirror image *Mutual Leap (After Nollét)*, also relate to Canell’s various experiments with energy and sound, three examples of her work in these adjoining fields being *The Luminiferous Aether* (actually a project by Robin Watkins in collaboration with Nina Canell), based on the recording of magnetic storms in wintery Alaska, and works such as *To Be Hidden and So Invisible (21000 Hz)*, which involved the fictional

<sup>7</sup> No doubt in part because of the awe it has been able to instill in the overwhelming mass of ignorami for whom the legend of the so-called ‘God particle’ (i.e. the elusive Higgs boson) has come to acquire an almost religious significance, the Genevan particle physics laboratory has been especially successful in reviving the ancient, frustrated dream of science’s union with art—CERN even has its own art and resident artists program, producing such predictably titled exhibitions as *Signatures of the Invisible* and *Shadows of the Infinite*. Much to the young Swedish artist’s credit, Canell has successfully resisted giving in to the facile temptations of making artworks inspired by, say, string theory—the pitfall in which many an artist bedazzled by the enigmatic lingo of advanced theoretical physics has been observed to stumble. Canell does have a clearly-defined interest in ‘hard’ science of course, but this interest does not lead her into the quagmire of pompous metaphysical speculations on the origins of time and matter; the scientific model used in her practice is closer both to the stunted tradition of alchemy (in that the natural realm of electricity, stone and water is approached as a field of *symbols* first and foremost) as well as to that of the amateur-engineer or gifted craftsman leisurely tinkering away at (models of) machines that serve no measurable use and thus appear more closely connected with the Renaissance paradigm of art as invention. ‘Craft’ certainly is a key term when considering her art, if only for the implied critique of mastery of ‘professional’ scientific research it entails, as well as for the link with the domestic realm—see our earlier discussion of *la fée électricité*—that it touches upon.

amplification of the soundless sounds produced by a watermelon, and *Anatomy of Dirt in Quiet Water*, a brute resonance study of natural entropy. Canell’s avowed interest in infra/ultrasound, frequency shifts, and quasi-geological processes of fossilization, petrification, and solidification in such works—a list to which the aforementioned *Temporary Encampment (Five Blue Solids)* should also be added—often concerns the imperceptible pace of change that ‘sees’ one material or form become or turn into another, as well as the porous borders, which are really *anything but* borders, between different material states and processes of (de-)materialization—what could also be described as *osmosis*.<sup>8</sup> And so we find ourselves returned, following the many meandering materials (paths, lines, conductors, channels) that litter the floor, mostly, of the artist’s studio, to an earlier topic of conversation (see note 4), the dialectic of stasis and motion, movement and stillness—merging and e-merging, emergence and emergency.

Canell has referred to her work with certain less-than-obvious materials as a form of externalized thinking, or as a laborious externalization of thought as such—giving thought the ‘natural’ appearance,

<sup>8</sup> The reference to the osmotic process helps to explain the subtitle, so to speak, of Canell’s *Mutual Leap*, the bracketed (*After Nollét*): Jean-Antoine Nollét is the name of the French amateur physicist whose groundbreaking work in the field of electrical conduction and electromagnetism eventually led to the discovery, in 1748, of osmosis.

that is, of a geological, thermodynamic process. (What, in this context, would a change of *mind* look like?) That this process of ‘naturalization’ is only achieved through artful labor, i.e. laboriously—cue the painstaking, meticulous assembly of many an unruly element, force or form, requiring tireless experiment, trial and error, in the most literal sense of the word—, only helps to highlight the common ground where the artist’s studio and the laboratory (as a site of such exact—and exacting—labor) meet. And here art’s haphazard thinking resembles *tinkering*, in the slightly nostalgic sense of art and science’s shared roots in an ethic of amateur craftsmanship keen on retaining the possibility of awe in the face of nature’s profound disorder of things (for the ‘order of things’ is only really or fully instituted *after* the twilight of this originary art-and-science synthesis). Ordering thoughts, disordering things—note how both things and thoughts can be read as both subject and object of this sentence. Collecting one’s thoughts as if they were rare earths, dispersing their physical traces: the artist’s studio only resembles the scientist’s laboratory in so far as *entropy* is the subject of the research conducted in both, its pleasure derived from the singular spectacle, as Nina Canell herself put it so lyrically, of seeing contingency seep into nature’s trusted chain of command.

Not to simply return to, but to conclude the encircling gesture of the present essay's variously scattered thoughts, a final reflection on electricity fairies, occasioned by looking at, and hearing about, a work titled *Into the Eyes as Ends of Hair*—an installation made up of a small transistor radio from which a handful of wiry tentacles sprout, reaching to the heavens. Tuned between stations, the radio's arborescent 'cloud of knowing' registers electric and electro-magnetic shifts emanating from adjoining rooms (including, but not limited to, those generated by lighting) as quasi-soundless sparks of disembodied activity.

This type of telekinetic affect surely relates to one of the more bizarre embodiments of the modern wireless woman, which can be found in the female-dominated realm of knowledge where the tradition of Theremin playing and the history of telepathic and psychokinetic practices—the world of what is so oddly named the 'medium,' the *go-between*—meet. More noteworthy still—and I can't help but think here of the Tunguska event of June 30, 1908<sup>9</sup>—is the fact that throughout history this nebulous field of crypto-expertise has been dominated (if not invented, then certainly 'channeled') by ladies from the East. Firstly, the Theremin itself (or aetherophone, as it was originally known) is of course of Russian vintage: its inventor, Léon Theremin, who died at the venerable age of 97 years in 1993, accidentally stumbled upon the instrument's innovative operating principles—the modulation and amplification of sound

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<sup>9</sup> The Tunguska event refers to a massive explosion that occurred in Central Siberia, some thousand kilometers north of the city of Krasnoyarsk, in the Lower Tunguska valley, and caused the flattening of tens of thousands of trees in a 40-mile radius of the site of impact. According to the NASA website, the exact causes of the explosion continue to be debated to this day, but there is growing agreement that "on the morning of June 30, 1908, a large space rock, about 120 feet across, entered the atmosphere of Siberia and then detonated in the sky. [...] It is estimated that the asteroid entered the Earth's atmosphere traveling at a speed of about 33,500 miles per hour. During its quick plunge, the 220-million-pound space rock heated the air surrounding it to 44,500 degrees Fahrenheit. At 7:17 a.m. (local Siberia time), at a height of about 28,000 feet, the combination of pressure and heat caused the asteroid to fragment and annihilate itself, producing a fireball and releasing energy equivalent to about 185 Hiroshima bombs." I was inadvertently reminded of this (pop-cultural) factoid when I visited Nina Canell in her studio some months ago to discover that she was about to start work on a sculpture that would incorporate a large piece of lodestone, involving the strategic use of magnetic force fields—which seems to chime rather elegantly with the intriguing fact that, back in the Lower Tunguska valley, hardly any traces remain of the actual meteorite that caused so much destruction a century or so ago (it literally went up in smoke, like a rumor, or a myth). The famous black-and-white photographs of thousands of trees strewn across the Siberian plains like so many matchsticks, finally, resonate with the so-called 'arborescent' imagery I discerned in the enigmatically titled

based on gesture (as opposed to actual contact or manual handling) only—in 1920s Petrograd. Having spent several years in the United States, the mysterious conditions of Theremin's return, in 1938—i.e. at the height of the purges that would result in Stalin's notorious Moscow show trials—to his fatherland were compounded by his subsequent scientific work in the service of Soviet intelligence and espionage (one of his most influential inventions in this field, a tiny listening device, was simply known as "the thing"); it is rather appropriate, then, that the eerie, ethereal sound of the Theremin would become such a recognizable staple of those 1950s science-fiction films that so clearly took their paranoid cues from Cold War culture. More important for our present discussion, however, is the fact that very early on the Theremin became the instrument of choice for a handful of charismatic women, many of them Soviet-Russian-born, who did much to popularize its otherworldly sound register, thus adding further weight to the habitual conflation of the political uncanny with

(CONT.) *Into the Eyes as Ends of Hair*, the mere mention of which inevitably leads us to consider Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's classic distinction between trees (*arbores*, the arborescent) and weeds (rhizomes, the rhizomatic) as two rivaling models of thought, one resolutely linear, hier-archival, and centralist, the other its exact anarchic opposite. If the human brain does resemble a tree, and derives its unilateral penchant for linear, hierarchical, and centralizing thought from its tree-like structure, what kind of entropic thinking or thought process does a gigantic jumble of uprooted trees 'represent'? That of *art*?

both feminine mystery and oriental mystique (the name of Mata Hari came up earlier—it should do so again). The best known of these is probably Clara Rockmore, née Clara Reisenberg in Vilnius in 1911, originally a violin student at Saint Petersburg's famed Imperial Conservatory. The Theremin family inevitably produced its own fair share of virtuosos, Leon's daughter Natasha Theremin being the leading name in the field. And the world's current leading performer, finally, is Theremin's grandniece Lydia Kavina, born in Moscow in 1967, where she continues to teach the instrument at the city's world-famous conservatory.

This oddball subdivision of futurist ethnomusicology intersects at various points with the history of psychokinesis—the singular gift of being able to move (bend, morph) things with the mind without any direct contact or like form of physical mediation, much like a Theremin-player moulds the astral body of sound—but perhaps nowhere more emphatically than in the storied case of Canell's namesake Nina Kulagina, whose psychic powers became the object of intense homefront scientific scrutiny in the closing decades of her life—she died in 1990, much of her experimental track record forever shrouded in Soviet secrecy—, some of which explicitly focused on her alleged ability to generate strong voltages, *fee électricité* style, using only her willpower. Electric ladyland: in retrospect, there seems to be some historical justice attached to the fact that Soviet Russian women in particular—Alla Vinogradova is another celebrated case in point—were 'chosen' to act as the exemplary

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vessels of so many fearsome kinetic powers (I continue to refer to the tradition of Theremin-playing as well here); not only were the egalitarian tenets of proto-feminism—think of Rosa Luxemburg, think of Clara Zetkin, the only non-Russian woman to have been buried in the Kremlin necropolis—wholly integral to the socialist project, none other than Lenin himself once memorably defined socialism as "Soviets plus electricity" (a statement that belongs to the NEP era, incidentally, during which the visual arts experienced its brief last flowering, crowned by Aleksandr Rodchenko's photographic portrait of the Shukhov radio tower in Moscow—a symbol of the Revolution's historical dependence upon the power of radio waves).

To conclude (to *really* conclude—why else would I have brought up both the Theremin and telekinesis?), we could probably launch into yet another wild hypothesis here, speculating that on a basic level, much art, contemporary or not, belongs to the long and shadowy history of psychokinetic ('wireless') practices—the history, that is, of ordering things according to the whimsical a-logic of the mind as it constantly attunes itself to the changing conceptions as to what constitutes the aesthetic or the artistically valid and worthwhile—i.e. as to what, with regards to such aesthetic questions, is 'in the air.'<sup>10</sup> In art, more than anywhere else, this order (or ordering) of things can easily acquire the definite quality of a natural given, it becomes 'naturalized'—the outcome of a seemingly organic process, arranged in such a way as if the willpower of yet unknown magnetic (electrical,

geological, meteorological, etc.) forces 'wanted' it thus. Rather than as the source or proprietor of this logic, the artist here appears as a mere *medium*—see the other Nina—through which these forces proceed to speak, or (more appropriately) by way of which these forces *think*. More appositely still—as I stare at the photograph of a six-thousand-year-old piece of chewing gum (found in Finland) that Nina Canell sent me—the artist's brain as well as the artist's studio could be imagined as spaces and places where these thoughts, after having been aerially ingested and before hardening into objects, are mulled or *chewed over*.

The shimmering, membrane-like contours of traces left behind by forces, of force-thoughts coagulating into trace-objects: if *Into the Eyes as Ends of Hair* is a tele-pathic or 'sensing' machine, its synaptic circuitry and schematic arborescent form also make it look like

<sup>10</sup> Although—and I'm consciously addressing the artist (first and foremost) here, as she may not be *so* excited to see her work turn into a diving platform from which to take a plunge into the depths of grand art theoretical pontification—I have no desire to engage in deep aesthetic theory, it is perhaps worth noting here that the mercurial nature of this process of ever-shifting conceptions (of the aesthetic) also ties art, contemporary or not, to the long and shadowy history of *proxemics*, the "study of the human use of space within the context of culture." That a major part of Canell's telekinetic practice concerns the "human use of space" hardly requires further emphasis here.

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a 'thinking' machine (leafless trees equally look like brains). What we marvel at upon entering the exhibition space, in short, are not just thoughts, momentarily frozen in various stages of de/materialization, but thinking itself. It crackles.

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