



Declan Long

Near Here

In a wonderful essay on the poet Paul Muldoon, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips praises his subject's ability to focus on an 'odd detail that, singled out, singles him out and moves him on.'¹ Differently put, this might be thought of as a paradoxical talent for simultaneously separating distinct elements of the world (beckoning us near to a very precise *something*) and for discovering unorthodox means of connecting them, for stringing the world together in unexpected ways. 'What occupies Muldoon,' Phillips says, 'is what sets him off, what springs the narrator of the poem from where he is to somewhere else.' Muldoon maps a process of mental travel that compels him, as he says, to constantly 'think of something else, then something else again.'² And it is thus a type of art, as Phillips observes, formed by 'strange connections and unexpected affinities.'

There are many such connections and affinities in the work of Swedish artist Nina Canell—just as there is also a commitment to studious and eccentric *singling out*. There is much that tends towards the 'joined-up' in Canell's slyly associative thinking. Her determinedly low-key sculptures stage variously centred or decentred, gently sprawling or more strictly constrained, combinations of objects and materials—producing out-of-the-ordinary correspondences between different organic and man-made materials, or between different states and manifestations of matter and energy. Canell proposes new affinities and unities between stone, metal, electricity, air, waves, heat and a good deal more. One such work is, in fact, called *Affinity Units* (2012). These are occasions of material convergence, conduction and coercion. Varieties of charged proximity—of enforced, energised *nearness*—occur between substances and, certainly, between

Near Here (1 Microsecond), 2014. Collaboration with Robin Watkins. Photocopying toner, nylon, cable, mylar tape, 1,000,000 volt during 1 microsecond

- 1 Adam Phillips, 'Someone Else', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29 No.1, 4 January 2007.
- 2 Paul Muldoon, 'Something Else' in *Meeting the British* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p.33

previously unrelated ideas. Often, such connections are realised in subtly kinetic sculptural situations, wherein actual shifts in physical states are triggered: from material to immaterial, from solid to gaseous, or vice-versa. In these scenarios of surprisingly conjured cause-and-effect, ‘something’ meets ‘something else’ to become ‘something else again’.

But if experimental proximity is an acute priority, Canell is also assiduously attentive to understanding and displaying anxious distances between things. Her exhibitions could easily be characterised in terms of their essential sparseness, their necessary emptiness—or, more precisely, their *near* emptiness. Her work repeatedly forges links, but it also requires us to face the prospect of breaks in contact, of losses of service, of failures in communication. Canell’s sculptures frequently register a force of energy—and information—while at the same time recognising the possibility of a corresponding and accompanying absence (see, for example, the beautiful and barely-there collection of small stones and chewing gum leftovers that constitutes *Interiors (Elsewhere)* from 2013). *Mender* (2012) might initially be seen as nothing more than what it appears to be: a linked selection of seven slightly used, bent and somewhat battered, steel nails—a daisy-chain of discarded hardware. These tough shafts of practical, pointed metal hang together, however, under the influence of a hidden magnet and so they collectively dangle in an arrangement of uncharacteristic delicacy: of light-touch, tender stasis. Nails are, of course, normally used to fix things in place; they are hard, penetrating objects that ensure the maintenance of solidity and stability. Yet in *Mender* they are both singled out for unaccustomed attention and held in position by an unseen, impalpable power. Were this magnetic strength to be removed—or its polarity reversed—the nails would instantly fall to the floor; their temporary togetherness casually sundered. Moreover, it is worth noting that the form and size of *Mender* is conditioned by the available amount of connective energy. One more nail would be too many, adding too much of an additional burden: the length of the ‘chain’ is determined by the strength of the magnet. As such this is a work that plays modestly on forces of attraction and connection, but also on their limited reach, on their inevitable end-points.

Alluding to a typically concentrated and cryptic short poem by Muldoon called *Something Else* (1987), Phillips notes how a central reference to a length of chain in the work’s short, elliptical narrative is both a close-up focus of poetic curiosity and also a preferred idea of the poetic process itself. It is ‘explicitly, the length of chain with which the poet Nerval hanged himself’ and at the same time ‘the immeasurable length of a chain of associations, of one word (and thing) leading to

another.’ The chain is alluded to as the cause and circumstance of another writer’s mortal ‘ending’, but it also prompts Muldoon into a distracted mode of imaginative beginning: the poem’s concluding lines point to a newly initiated chain of thought, as he thinks ‘of something else, then something else again.’ Connecting chains, of one kind or another, have an equally uncertain status in Nina Canell’s ambiguously communicative sculptural practice. Recently for instance, in further reflecting on relations between visible hardware and invisible energies, one focus has been on electrical and communication cables: the physical links that are essential to the infrastructure of our contemporary immaterial world of wireless networks and cloud computing. These powerful cables are capable of channeling vast amounts of content over great distances—instantly springing us from where we are to somewhere else, immediately transforming the far-away into the near-here—and yet these physical conduits remain themselves untransformed by the process of constant transmission. They are, to use Canell’s preferred term, ‘forgetful’—and this forgetfulness is, she suggests, a crucial part of their functionality.

Forgetfulness is, undoubtedly, often viewed as a type of ending—a breakdown in a thought process, an inability to form needed mental links—but in some psychological or cultural situations it may also be the basis of revival and beginning. As Adam Phillips writes in another brief essay entitled ‘The Forgetting Museum’, ‘forgetting, both in personal and political life is hedged in by a kind of superstitious dread’ and yet, ‘forgetting has to be allowed for if memory—non-compliant, unmanufactured memory—is to have a chance.’³ By indirect means, Canell’s sculptures move us closer to such important questions about memory and forgetting, about beginnings and endings. She stimulates thought processes about how information is carried or conducted across varying physical and imaginative distances, about how it dissolves and disappears, and about how in other ways it can be remembered, recreated, re-connected. Her work might well be understood, therefore, as a thoroughly *current* form of art: creating its own unique and strange connections, and its own peculiar points of communicative interruption, just as it also asks how we might comprehend or query—or even transform—the intricate webs of connections within which we now live.

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3 Adam Phillips, ‘The Forgetting Museum’ in *Side Effects* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp.130–134.