

Satin Ions (essay)
 Published by Bom Dia Boa Tarde Boa Noite
 and Arko Art Centre, 2015
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A transformative stillness pervades the first room of Nina Canell's exhibition at Arko Art Center. Objects appear to be in a state of quiet, yet constant fluctuation and the interstices between them contain their own form of presence: different materials, forms, volumes and positions converge in each sculpture to articulate independent units as a relational encounter of energies. The second room contains various arrangements of small nails, which hang from and cling to one another by means of a magnetic force that allow the form and frail direction of the work to be conducted into shape. A wooden slab on the ground supports a chunk of moulded natural rubber, while a flat piece of material bearing some kind of electric imprint on its surface lies to its right. Attention visitors will also hear an intermittent sound emanating from an indeterminate source: a gentle hiss crackles in the background and something akin to an insect's wings flutters in the foreground. Finally, the last room contains a number of entangled fibre optic cable sheaths that look as if they have been shed. A sharp, high-pitched tone slips past these lumpy, collapsed forms and disappears.

In this a description of an actual exhibition or something that has been imagined? I'm standing in an empty exhibition space holding an A4 floor plan and envision what will unfold here when the walls are mounted and works are placed in each room according to plan. I'm with the time that is yet to come. Although physical limitations certainly exist for artists and curators, producing an exhibition begins with the possibility of freely imagining the forthcoming phases of a project in an empty room. We struggle not only with a single work, but also with relationships between works, countless technical problems, and the practicalities of emptying out and filling up space: stages that will ultimately be perceived as a specific decision, despite the infinite possibilities and indecisiveness they contain. These consecutive elements culminate in an exhibition, yet while such acts contribute to an exhibition's conception they nonetheless vanish at the moment of viewing. What we confront is a certain materialized work, the presence of a proper noun. This results from ongoing concerns, decisions, and actions undertaken in the past: temporalities that the work on display isn't capable of directly showing. Thus, it is also "foreign to legibility; illegible, then, inasmuch as to read is necessarily to enter through one's gaze into a relation of meaning or non-meaning with a presence".¹

Let us go back to the exhibition space, and some concrete examples. The frequency of an ultrasonic generator sets water in a basin into continuous motion in *Perpetuum Mobile (40kg)* (2009), which is installed at the entrance of the first room. An inaudible sound frequency generates mist that gently extends beyond the edge of the basin and

can often be near intangible to the audience. The artist focuses on a state, yet one that seems still, inert or asleep. We cannot always perceive the energy through a material's characteristics or potential. How would one then embody such energies? One possibility is through remaining static and their resulting temporal substrates. For example, the constant movement of surface tension holds water at bay, yet movement is manifested not through seeing it, but rather through the fact that the water continuously does not cross the line close to the edge of the broken stone tile. Similarly activated by time, the influence that vaporized water exerts on cement that has solidified over the past does not equally be an influence that imagines a more solid state in the future. The condensed volume of water's corpuscle with the inherent contradiction of being in the pre-packaged and re-packaged—as well as the strands from a single, large green sock leave us with the objects that are "thing shape and taking form". These are objects that loosen their bond with their original function, but somehow at the same time objects that are yet to unfold or take place.

Canell has long been interested in chewing gum, which she considers to be an object that can "suspend the act of thinking" rather than something purely mechanical to be discarded after chewing. Once chewed, a piece of gum becomes a residue that has been shaped by the process of mastication, traces of teeth, and tongue—and contains a parallel sequence of transformative activities within itself. Movement, rhythm, weight, pressure, and pauses while chewing lend an abstract sculptural form to the equally abstract means of thinking, which is normally immeasurable and not capable of being visualized by the mind. The history of gum is a long one, dating back to a fossil that is over 5000 years old, which is further contextualized by examples of different places in the world where the production and chewing of gum has been made possible by the use of various trees and plants. The form engraved in the gum's soft surface could be said to compress a moment of thought that belongs to thousands of years of human evolution into the minute traces of its elastic body.

"If thought is in some form energy or some kind of indirect generation of it in its advanced nerve endings, chewing while thinking might get some of that electromagnetic activity of our brain to stick around or settle in the chewing gum. If not clearly than clearly in the way that deep neural thoughts can propel a willing body into further work, mastication, thoughts and further forms of which the chewed gum serves as the only physical manifestation of that particular string of relevant or irrelevant sequence of thoughts. And the form of each chewed

humidifies a nearby sack of cement, which slowly solidifies over the course of the exhibition. A few glass axes, a white wet stone tile laid flat along the edge of a wall. *Titled Days of Maria* (2015), this piece consists of a transparent hydrophilic coat that holds a body of water in place through a non-stick wall of air. This impermeable barrier prevents the liquid from spilling out onto the floor and accentuates the slippery curvature that the water's surface tension makes visible on the flat stone. The short corridor ends as we move past this work, revealing an unobstructed view of the first room. *Blind Tablets (Blind)* (2015) and *Blind Tablets (Saturated)* (2015)—a high voltage cable and a satellite digital cable, respectively—have been laid out on a spatially refracting acrylic cube, installed between these works towards the centre of the left wall. *Open Circuit* (2015) captures bits of steel pressed into a frame while two red-light-copied carpets installed further down the same wall—entitled *Dimensional Shifts* (2015)—appear to be withers from some kind of an off-side. A delicate and fragile work made from extremely thin copper wires, *Altogether Altogether* (2014) extends across the entire back wall. It looks almost ridiculous in its comparison to its size.

The inexpressive material allows something that has already happened, namely a fully installed exhibition. Although it is being written in present tense, as in the first paragraph, I'm recalling the actual site of the exhibition in my mind in order to explain it, at the moment. I'm talking about the exhibition without being able to see it. This allows me to experience moving back and forth between concrete temporalities. As I recall the exhibition site, I move between the time when I imagined the exhibition in an empty space and the time in which I remember the exhibition as an event that has already passed. Thus, writing about that which doesn't exist at a particular moment is "nothing but a 'no' or 'yes'—taking place" where there is no "immediate present", yet which confuses these complex temporalities in the present. Despite the scope of a writer's endeavor, we face an anxiety that we will get both closer to and further away from the exhibition with a work of writing, an anxiety that artist's Christine Lee has believed will turn to stone if he looks back. However, such an anxiety ironically entails immersing oneself in now a work or an exhibition can be realized in the absence of immediate presence, to not turn to stone—a state of quasi-eternal creative tension. So why am I writing such a lengthy introduction, rather than talking about Nina Canell's work and the exhibition straight away? It's because Nina Canell's works are intriguing objects, referring the moment that will come forth within the tension between "yes" (that which presents an event) and "no" (that which retraces an event). The artist reveals the complex time laid in objects through the constancy of material.

As is often evident in Nina Canell's works, a "state" of an object and its invisible mobility, transformation, or transformation exists, however,

meaningly concretizes the leftover of a process that continues and remains invisible to us".

In the exhibition's second room Canell has included raw gum balls, congealing in the durational work *Three Long Microseconds* (2015). Moving at infinitesimal speed, which doesn't reveal immediate changes to the viewer, the mastic gum slowly and imperceptibly glisters down towards the floor over the course of the exhibition, constantly changing its shape. Since the ability of human beings to experience such a slow movement is limited, we only see the past of gummy by a difference in form over time. *Near Near (7 Microseconds)* (2014), a collaboration with Robin Watkins, is quite the opposite. This work features a collection of black photocopied paper through which a discharge of 1,500,000 volts will hit the aforementioned trees. Leading by the duration of a mere microsecond, the impinged afterimage is a result of a performative instant by the extremely brief and powerful impulse. If *Three Long Microseconds* never quite settles into a final form, then *Three (2015)* consists of a number of small groupings that are structurally fixed and determined to a precise yet fragile equation. A magnet has been positioned inside the wall behind an exact number of thin steel nails, thereby attracting them to the wall with this unaccountable force of adhesion. While the initial branch-like form is determined by the reach of magnetic chains, adding another nail to either of these formations would be impossible—it would drop to the ground—since the immaterial force is gradually diluted by the material centers they require in order to be embodied.

The *Winged Pavilion* (2014) and *The View* (2015), both collaborations with Robin Watkins, can be said to corroborate sounds that generate a presence or, conversely, that articulate an absence—which sometimes merge in the exhibition space. The *Winged Pavilion* comprises two FM radio receivers placed on the upper quadrant of two different walls in the second room, which transmit a quiet sequence of electrostatic signals asymmetrically interrupted by silent breaks. The signals are recordings of sounds that occur below our hearing range (infrasound), made with an antenna that has been placed in close proximity to tiny redcaps and grids that communicate with a swarm of thousands. Besides to the environment, they have to follow cues such as temperature, drought, humidity, and wind speed. Short audio files capture moments when the insects are drawn to and from the antenna, as they swarm into pillars, sheets, and double-like shapes by the wind.

Upon exiting the second room, the doorway of the third room frames a small floor-based sculpture. *Titled Thin View*, it generates a

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Let us go back to the exhibition space, and some concrete examples. The frequency of an ultrasonic generator sets water in a basin into continuous motion in *Perpetuum Mobile (40kg)* (2009), which is installed at the entrance of the first room. An inaudible sound frequency generates mist that gently extends beyond the edge of the basin and

1 Maurice Blanchot, 'The Absence of the Book' in *Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 422.

humidifies a nearby sack of cement, which slowly solidifies over the course of the exhibition. A few steps away, a visibly wet stone tile lays flat along the edge of a wall. Titled *Days of Inertia* (2015), this piece consists of a transparent hydrophobic coat that holds a body of water in place through a nano-scale wall of air. This imperceptible barrier prevents the liquid from spilling out onto the floor and accentuates the stubborn curvature that the water's surface tension makes visible on the flat stone. The short corridor ends as we move past this work, revealing an uninterrupted view of the first room. *Brief Syllable (Weak)* (2015) and *Brief Syllable (Saturated)* (2015) – a high voltage cable and a subsea signal cable, respectively – have been taxidermized in a spatially refracting acrylic cube. Installed between these works towards the centre of the left wall, *Green (Diffused)* (2015) captures bits of pale green lint in a frame while two rolled-up carpets installed further down the same wall – entitled *Dimension Withheld* (2015) – appear to be left-overs from some kind of an off-cut sale. A delicate and flimsy work made from extremely thin copper wires, *Attenuate Attenuate* (2014) extends across the entire back wall. It looks almost ridiculously fragile in comparison to its size.

The impressions recorded above describe something that has already happened, namely a fully installed exhibition. Although it is being written in present tense, as in the first paragraph, I'm revisiting the actual site of the exhibition in my mind in order to explain it. At the moment, I'm talking about the exhibition without being able to see it. This allows me to experience moving back and forth between complex temporalities. As I recall the exhibition site, I move between the time when I imagined the exhibition in an empty space and the time in which I remember the exhibition as an event that has already passed. Thus, writing about that which doesn't exist at a particular moment is "nothing but a 're-' or 'pre-' taking place"² where there is no "immediate present", yet which conflates these complex temporalities in the present. Despite the scope of a writer's endeavour, we face an anxiety that we will get both closer to and further away from the exhibition within a work of writing, an anxiety that mirrors Orpheus' fear that his beloved will turn to stone if he looks back. However, such an anxiety ironically entails immersing oneself in how a work or an exhibition can be revived in the absence of immediate presence, to not turn to stone – a state of quintessential creative tension. But why am I writing such a lengthy introduction, rather than talking about Nina Canell's work and the exhibition straight away? It's because Nina Canell's works are intriguing objects, informing the moment that will come forth within the tension between "pre-" (that which precedes an event) and "re-" (that which retraces an event). The artist reveals the complex time latent in objects through the consistency of material.

As is often evident in Nina Canell's works, a "state" of an object and its invisible motility, transformation, or transmission exists, however,

2 Andrew Cutrofello, 'Blanchot's art of discretion' in *Continental Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 155.

it can often be near intangible to the audience. The artist focuses on a state, yet one that seems still, inert or asleep. We cannot always perceive the energy through a material's characteristics or potential. How would one then embody such energies? One possibility is through remaining traces and their resulting temporal relationships. For example, the constant movement of surface tension holds water at bay, yet movement is manifested not through seeing it, but rather through the fact that the water unexpectedly does not cross the line close to the edge of the broken stone tile. Similarly activated by time, the influence that vaporized water exerts on cement that has solidified over the past days can equally be an influence that imagines a more solid state in the future. The condensed volume of leftover carpets – with the inherent contradiction of being both pre-packaged and re-packaged – as well as the shreds from a single stray green sock leave us with found objects that are "losing shape and taking form". These are objects that loosen their bond with their original function, but somehow at the same time objects that are yet to unfold or take place.

Canell has long been interested in chewing gum, which she considers to be an object that can "record the act of thinking" rather than something purely mechanical to be discarded after chewing. Once chewed, a piece of gum becomes a residue that has been shaped by the process of mastication, traces of teeth, and tongue – and contains a parallel sequence of transformative activities within the brain. Movement, rhythm, weight, pressure, and pauses while chewing lend an abstract sculptural form to the equally abstract realm of thinking, which is normally immeasurable and not capable of being visualized by the mind. The history of gum is a long one, dating back to a fossil that is over 5000 years old, which is further contextualized by examples of different places in the world where the production and chewing of gum has been made possible by the sap of various trees and plants. The form engraved in the gum's soft surface could be said to compress a moment of thought that belongs to thousands of years of human evolution into the minute traces of its elastic body.

"If thought is in some form energy or some kind of indirect generation of it in its extended nerve endings, chewing while thinking might get some of that electromagnetic activity of our brain to stick around or settle in the chewing-gum. If not literally then laterally in the way that even banal thoughts can propel a waiting body into further wait, mastication, thoughts and further forms of which the chewed gum serves as the only physical manifestation of that particular string of relevant or irrelevant sequence of thoughts. And the form of each chewed gum is also as particular as the next. A form is the outcome of all the happenings it has endured, wrote Aristotle; in this case an outcome that marks such a stretch, possibly nothing but a sugar-extracted polymer dropping that nevertheless

meaningfully concretises the leftover of a process that continues and remains invisible to us”.³

In the exhibition’s second room Canell has included raw gum base, employing it in the durational work *Three Long Milliseconds* (2015). Moving at infinitesimal speed, which doesn’t reveal immediate changes to the viewer, the mastic gum slowly and imperceptibly glides down towards the floor over the course of the exhibition, constantly changing its shape. Since the ability of human beings to experience such a slow movement is limited, we only see the pull of gravity by a difference in form over time. *Near Here (1 Microsecond)* (2014), a collaboration with Robin Watkins, is quite the opposite. This work involves a thin layer of black photocopying toner through which a discharge of 1,000,000 volts has left its arborescent trace. Lasting for the duration of a mere microsecond, the imprinted afterimage is a result of a performative instant by this extremely brief and powerful impulse. If *Three Long Milliseconds* never quite settles into a final form, then *Thins* (2015) consists of a number of small groupings that are structurally fixed and determined by a precise yet fragile equation. A magnet has been positioned inside the wall behind an exact number of thin steel nails, thereby attaching them to the wall with this unconventional kind of adhesive. While the initial branch-like form is determined by the reach of magnetic chance, adding another nail to either of these formations would be impossible – it would drop to the ground – since the immaterial force is gradually diluted by the material carriers they require in order to be embodied.

Two-Winged Pavilion (2014) and *Thin Vowel* (2015), both collaborations with Robin Watkins, can be said to contemplate sounds that generate a presence or, conversely, that articulate an absence – which sometimes overlap in the exhibition space. *Two-Winged Pavilion* comprises two FM radio receivers placed on the upper quadrant of two different walls in the second room, which transmit a quiet sequence of electrostatic signals asymmetrically interrupted by silent breaks. The signals are recordings of sounds that occur below our hearing range (infrasound), made with an antenna that has been placed in close proximity to tiny midges and gnats that communicate within a swarm of thousands. Sensitive to the environment, they have to follow cues such as temperature, daylight, humidity, and wind speed. Short audio takes capture moments when the insects are drawn to and from the antenna, as they swarm into pillars, sheets, and cloudlike shapes by the wind.

Upon exiting the second room, the doorway of the third room frames a small floor-based sculpture. Titled *Thin Vowel*, it generates a waveform that journeys through the upper part of the audible frequency range before it disappears from our hearing range, seemingly dissolving into the air. This work also moves between what is there and what is

3 Nina Canell at the Arko Artist talk, August 2015.

not, using the limits of our perception to generate the sensation of a recurring presence. Taking its power from the 240-volt power outlet, the waveform generator converts this signal to a pure sine wave, and its pitch shifts over a number of seconds. The sound moves as if it’s drawing an arc: the high-pitched tone turns into a sharper signal that stretches and becomes thinner as it moves into the distance, evoking a height beyond our reach. In the third room, this sound appears and disappears, directing our attention towards an indefinable point somewhere above our heads before our eyes switch focus to the cable sheaths that lay scattered across the floor.

In the third and final room of the exhibition, the new work *Shedding Sheaths* (2015) has been combined to form an installation with *Thin Vowels* and *Satin Ion* (2015), a fatigued neon work that has been draped over two bent copper stumps. While visiting a recycling centre in the outskirts of Seoul, the artist found sheaths – cables whose conductive innards have been removed – that had become entangled and intertwined with other sheaths, sometimes of different colours and shapes. Literally caught in between melting and being repurposed, the endless meters of cable that once served to connect distant subjects have been cut and pressed into dense units by the recyclers. As expressed in *Brief Syllable (Weak)* and *Brief Syllable (Saturated)*, the artist is interested in the infrastructure of cables that form the foundation of our wirelessly networked society, which ironically requires the production of more wires to support itself. Despite Korea’s obsession for higher speeds (South Korea has by far the fastest internet connections in the world), the actuality of subterranean or subsea cables and their environs are difficult to envision. But apart from a skewed representation of technological shedding, these collapsed forms speak of a strange kind of tension – a well-insulated embrace. There is a kind of anxiety in the meeting between the terse wavelength, pale neon, and synthetic skins. The room is empty yet full.

For Canell, there is no mediation that is lossless. An output is never the pure transmission of a source, but equally the distance it has travelled, the things it has come in contact with, and bounced with or off. Considering sculpture as sensitive to and perhaps even as a condition, her work emphasizes external influences that are temporarily grounded rather than bound by material. Recent philosophical tendencies are also interesting to consider in relation to the artist’s work: object centered thinking and acting, with the shift of perspective that it proposes. Beginning with the concreteness of material and a perspective that is strictly grounded in the reality of the material world, a new method of realism enters the sculptural realm. By strictly focusing on the material aspects of objects, the artist rethinks their logic and meaning as an active choreographer. Addressing the abstract journey and movement of materials as they connect and find new ways to coexist, Canell traces them through an arbitrary sense of material precision. This impulse can also be found in the title of the exhibition, *Satin Ions*. Borrowed

from the name of a special hairbrush that generates ions to make hair calm, smooth, and shiny as satin, the title humorously articulates the effects caused by the world of molecular movement as visual, tactile and olfactory impulses. Prior to the exhibition, without knowing where the title came from, I coincidentally saw an ad in an in-flight magazine that was described by the manufacturer as follows:

“A push of a button activates the patented Iontec jets releasing millions of active ions. Active ions work very much like a conditioner. They envelop every single hair and quickly restore the moisture balance of your hair that usually gets lost during styling with excessive heat. On top, active ions instantly tame frizz and flying hair for touchable smoothness and shine.”