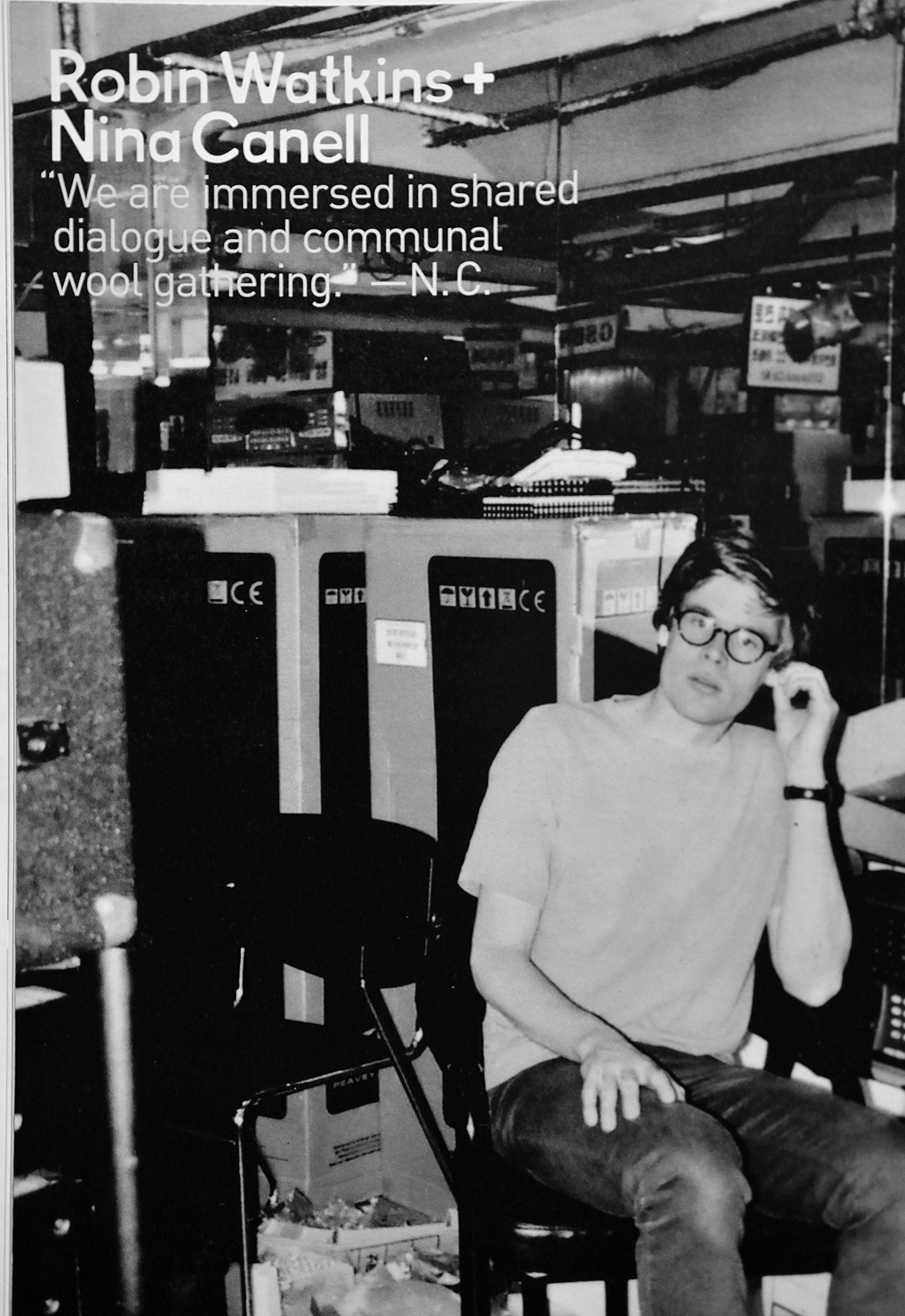
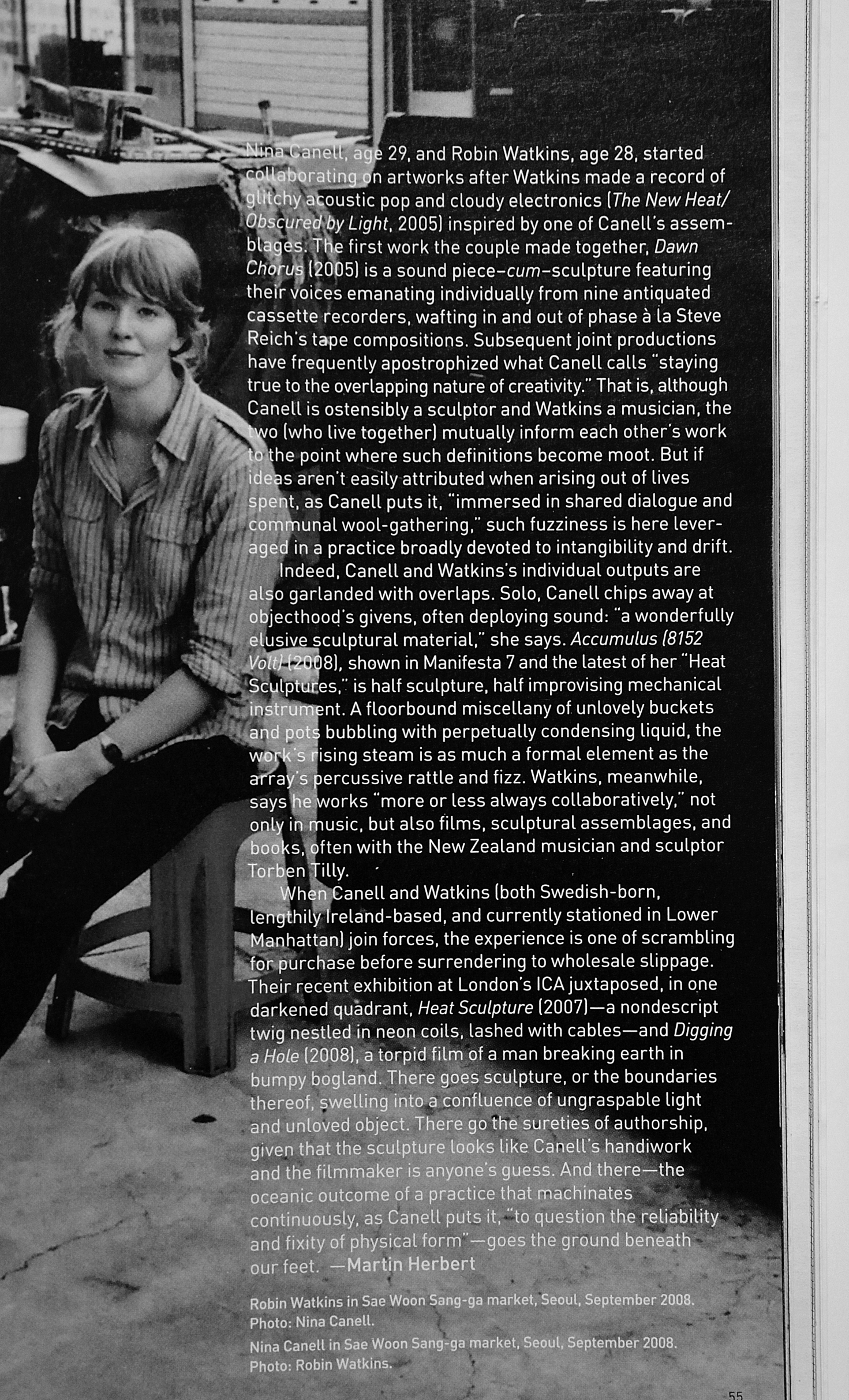


# Robin Watkins + Nina Canell

"We are immersed in shared  
dialogue and communal  
wool gathering." —N.C.







Nina Canell, age 29, and Robin Watkins, age 28, started collaborating on artworks after Watkins made a record of glitchy acoustic pop and cloudy electronics (*The New Heat/ Obscured by Light*, 2005) inspired by one of Canell's assemblages. The first work the couple made together, *Dawn Chorus* (2005) is a sound piece—*cum*—sculpture featuring their voices emanating individually from nine antiquated cassette recorders, wafting in and out of phase à la Steve Reich's tape compositions. Subsequent joint productions have frequently apostrophized what Canell calls "staying true to the overlapping nature of creativity." That is, although Canell is ostensibly a sculptor and Watkins a musician, the two (who live together) mutually inform each other's work to the point where such definitions become moot. But if ideas aren't easily attributed when arising out of lives spent, as Canell puts it, "immersed in shared dialogue and communal wool-gathering," such fuzziness is here leveraged in a practice broadly devoted to intangibility and drift.

Indeed, Canell and Watkins's individual outputs are also garlanded with overlaps. Solo, Canell chips away at objecthood's givens, often deploying sound: "a wonderfully elusive sculptural material," she says. *Accumulus (8152 Volt)* (2008), shown in *Manifesta 7* and the latest of her "Heat Sculptures," is half sculpture, half improvising mechanical instrument. A floorbound miscellany of unlovely buckets and pots bubbling with perpetually condensing liquid, the work's rising steam is as much a formal element as the array's percussive rattle and fizz. Watkins, meanwhile, says he works "more or less always collaboratively," not only in music, but also films, sculptural assemblages, and books, often with the New Zealand musician and sculptor Torben Tilly.

When Canell and Watkins (both Swedish-born, lengthily Ireland-based, and currently stationed in Lower Manhattan) join forces, the experience is one of scrambling for purchase before surrendering to wholesale slippage. Their recent exhibition at London's ICA juxtaposed, in one darkened quadrant, *Heat Sculpture* (2007)—a nondescript twig nestled in neon coils, lashed with cables—and *Digging a Hole* (2008), a torpid film of a man breaking earth in bumpy bogland. There goes sculpture, or the boundaries thereof, swelling into a confluence of ungraspable light and unloved object. There go the sureties of authorship, given that the sculpture looks like Canell's handiwork and the filmmaker is anyone's guess. And there—the oceanic outcome of a practice that machinates continuously, as Canell puts it, "to question the reliability and fixity of physical form"—goes the ground beneath our feet. —Martin Herbert

Robin Watkins in Sae Woon Sang-ga market, Seoul, September 2008.  
Photo: Nina Canell.

Nina Canell in Sae Woon Sang-ga market, Seoul, September 2008.  
Photo: Robin Watkins.