



NINA CANELL
WE WOKE UP WITH ENERGY

NOVEMBER 2005 - JANUARY 2006

TOGETHER AGAIN

It is the day before Nina Canell's show opens at mother's tankstation. Two bodies crouch on the floor of the gallery. Their movements are subtle. In fact, they look almost frozen save for the slow scrolling of a finger winding audiotape, or a slight shifting of weight as hands deftly tinker with small sets of neon lights that make up *Dawn Chorus* (2005). The installation, positioned on the floor, forms a stage of sorts made from wooden cable spools and plywood. A cluster of electric cords winds over and along the makeshift podium, where a posse of nine cassette players—the chorus—awaits a sound check. A collaboration between Canell and Robin Watkins, it is one of numerous audio projects the duo has produced together, first in Sweden where they met, and in Dublin where they have lived for the past six years. Each cassette contains a voice piece, made from samples of their own voices recorded via Dictaphone and then transferred to create several continuous loops. The loops play in unison, slipping in and out of sync as each cycle repeats over several minutes.

Based on a technical discovery by musician Steve Reich, phasing involves multiple acoustic phrases played back through separate sources to create a polyphonic audio piece. A work varies according to the looped tapes' relative durations and the desynchronisations that emerge over time. The result is an unpredictable, yet cyclic composition, determined as much by the choice of aural phraseology as the mechanics of analogue playback. In Reich's words, "Instead of a particular relationship, here is a whole way of making music, going from unison through all these contrapuntal relationships, all the way back to unison. All the possible relationships, rational and irrational, are there." Phasing is a way of working predicated on multiplicity and deviation—a process that adjusts according to the variability of group dynamics. Key here is the performative aspect of the composition itself: *Dawn Chorus* is in possession of all the parts it needs to continue indefinitely. Like other works in the exhibition, it hinges on real time which extends the installation beyond its physical position in the room. A notable openness in the exhibition's layout gives us permission to wander, to jump from one idea to the next, to be involved with spontaneous energies, and as such the viewer/listener's relationship to each work is transitory and variable. Location here is about portability, flexibility, and most of all proximity.

As a logical consequence, the exhibition is as much a soundscape as it is an arrangement of correlative works built through discrete moments of acoustic crossover. Infused by a mutuality of sonic 'zones', the environment takes on a 'live' element owing to audible fluctuations which occur along the path or cycle we follow as we move from one zone to the next. To establish the backbone, Canell installed *Half the Pace of a Given Place* (2005) in the far end of the gallery. Made from a reel-to-reel player and an exposed tape loop that encircles a ring of bottles placed on the floor, the precarious physicality of the piece—played out by the combination of the tape's low, drawn out tenor and the unfixed placement of the bottles—conditions the work, spatially and temporally. With each orbit it is on the brink of breaking down. As *Half the Pace* limps along, *Stråken* (2005), a small-scale video projection on the opposite edge of tankstation steeps the space with the steady drone of an outboard motor. Surrounded by



Dawn Chorus. In collaboration with Robin Watkins. 2005. Mixed media. Dimensions variable

Half the pace of a given place. 2005. Reel-to-reel player extended tape loop, plastic bottles. Dimensions variable

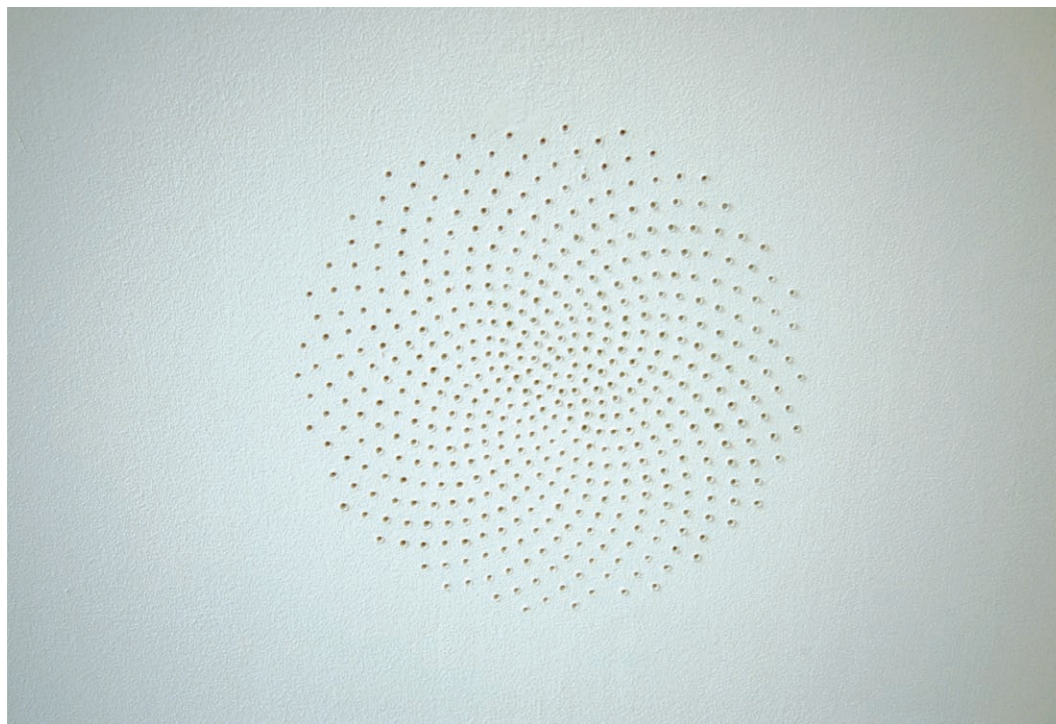






-2, 8, 20, 28, 50, 82, 126. 2005. Wood, plastic containers. Dimensions variable

Aktis Capsa. 2005. Holes in wall. Dimensions variable



trees in the middle of a lake in the Swedish countryside, a lone motorboat rotates around and around—the effect of its steering having been tied off to one side. In Swedish, the word ‘stråken’ has two meanings: a bow for a string instrument, and a walking path. Yet, it also has phonetic connotations to the English word ‘stroke’. As if drawing on water, each mechanized revolution leaves a white ring in its wake—an effect that imbues the vessel with a sense of autonomy akin to the experimentations of stop motion animation. The abandoned machine has a mind of its own, animated by its own hapless logic.

WE WOKE UP WITH ENERGY, the title of Canell’s exhibition, derives from a passage spoken by John Cage in 1976. In it he alludes to a sense of experimentation and process where failure leads to new ideas. Canell develops work through an undoing of formal conventions by way of testing, an attitude towards making inherited from Cage and others. This is about not knowing, not predicting an outcome, and not tempering one’s output according to predetermined rules. Through tenuous interplays between process and intention, intuition and deliberation, structures appear, emerging through trial and error and extracted through the tangential intersections of people, objects, and sounds. Autonomous objects (in Canell’s words), “find ways to collaborate” and in doing so the boundaries between the symbolic constructs of art and music translate into a functioning reality. Art results from messing around with materials, playing with the pragmatics of structure, seeing what things can do, what the limits are, and where they can be pushed. In one of four *Blås Instruments* (2005), a funnel inserted into a hand held blender comprises a hybrid sculpture, reminiscent of a slightly retro readymade from the 1950s or 60s. This Dadaesque collaging repeats elsewhere in the gallery. Two bright yellow buckets, like twins conjoined at birth, lie facing each other on the floor (*Buckets (Möbius twist)*); a cluster of soap bottles blooms from a scrap of pegboard (*-2, 8, 20, 28, 50, 82, 126*). These new, symbiotic configurations ally Canell’s sculptural work with a stylised aesthetic particular to artists such as Liam Gillick and Caroline McCarthy, who intermingle formal decisions about colour, texture, shape and design with references to industry, fashion, and graphics. As with Gillick and McCarthy, there is an investment here in the ‘contemporary’ as heterogeneous and indiscriminate, where one formalising system can be substituted for another. All contextual fields present a potential aesthetic language to play with.

In appealing to the contemporary, Canell courts the anachronistic. Like tableaux in fashion, we can locate a ‘look’ in this work that draws freely from the past in order to approximate a visual currency in the present. It is art derived through the cyclical, what is in-and-out, and not through absolutes. Canell finds much of the fodder for her sculptures by rummaging through markets and industrial skips, discovering items deemed redundant by others, that for her are all the more usable for their retroactive inhibition. Outmoded technologies, those instruments of recording, measuring, and marking that we replace with new learning, possess a provisional quality, which allows Canell to create new operational systems that translate into a new aesthetic. Nicolas Bourriaud’s example of the transformative commodity illustrates this propensity for conversion with an old sewing machine that via the flea market becomes a new kitchen table. Objects on the brink of obsolescence present the raw material for investigation, as in *Accumulus* (2005). On the screen of a tv monitor (fittingly, slightly behind the times),



a 3-dimensional polygonal shape rotates at varying speeds and directions, in sync with the sporadic clicking of a digital counter. Here, the mechanics of a discarded electro-physiological instrument become the focus of experimentation, the starting point to make a designer machine that combines computer-generated animation with out-of-date equipment.

High above in the gallery rafters looms the irregular form of *Luftkluster* (2005), a patchwork balloon fabricated from pieces of mylar. Its colours and shape correlate with *Accumululus*' little digital gem. Virtual and material cousins, equally dispersive and diffuse. We can begin to understand why Canell so carefully integrates sound into her overall installation. Sound here inextricably links the visual, crystallising the works in the exhibition. Our encounters are as much about hearing as seeing. Distinct from the interactive movements in improvisational music, the organising structure of works like *Dawn Chorus*, *Half the Pace*, *Stråken*, and *Accumululus* arise through chance encounters, which lead to interpretative shifts in direction. Aural references are always present (some more literally than others). Even where sound is not an inherent component of a single work, visual references to rhythm, vibration and repetition lend to the omnipresent ambient phasing that saturates the space. A prime example of this effect is *Aktis Capsa* (2005), a formation of small, circular punctures made directly in the gallery wall. The title presents a binary: *aktis* is Latin for 'ray', *capsa* is Greek for 'container.' Holes spiral outwards, emanating, pulsating. Mute.

This dualism embodies Canell's practice. Without reconciling differences, she lets contrasting elements create meaning. She is persistently curious, yet her pursuits are not about one truth. She is more interested in prototypes than archetypes, and this philosophical attitude easily transfers into her approach towards an art practice. The act of 'making' opens up to many, mutable possibilities, ready for interpretation, manipulation, reinvention. Collaboration here is intrinsically generative; it is enthusiastic problem solving combined with unrestricted recreation. Think-tanks and play-stations. Activity predicated on cooperation, sociality, working together, feeding ideas back and forth, playing, arranging, reversing roles in order to collectively make something that without collaboration would not exist. Likewise, we experience the artwork as a fleeting passage where parts come together. Formal conditions collapse in favour of a kind of temporality or temporariness that inextricably links art to its exhibitory moment. At the site of installation, all the parts come together, briefly, as though once the sound turns off everything dissipates and disappears. *Accumululus* is not as much an end point as it is an interim system; *Half the Pace* is less sculpture, and more a series of transfers, a mobile chain of events. Even the self-contained *Blås Instruments* enact a fusion based on interconnectivity and implied divisibility. In these annexed forms, everything connects—sonically, spatially, socially—together, again.

Sarah Pierce