

NINA CANELL  
O LITTLE DROPS

APRIL – MAY



## O LITTLE DROPS

There is a tendency to measure success by recourse to finality: the final product, the end result; things are boxed off and comprehensively enumerated. Little consideration is given to the category of the *potential*, it being operative, seemingly indifferent to the domain of finality. Its parameters are unstuck and mutable. Perhaps it is not even a question of potential being indifferent to finality, but rather that it holds something back: it eludes the totalising imperative, and shirks back towards itself. It remains pure in its reticent incorruptibility.

The potential work exists contrary to, or unmoved by, expectations. It is not the unfinished work, or even the work-in-progress, but rather unsullied potentiality: what does or does not unfold on its horizon cannot be predicted. It may just as easily amount to nothing. Thus, to take a chance on the potential work is akin to a kind of faith that underscores any engagement with it. Giorgio Agamben, in his short meditation on potentiality<sup>1</sup>, describes Aristotle's two famous interpretations of it. The first is what he terms *generic* potentiality, which denotes a kind of innate capacity, unlearned and natural; say, the potential of a child to grow. The other kind is of more interest to Aristotle: this is the potentiality that exists due to some special capacity or knowledge. An example of this might be an architect who has the potential to design houses, or indeed the painter with the potential to create paintings. The former breed, the generic, has a kind of inevitability about it: the potential is acted upon with little or no effort. The latter, on the other hand, is predicated not on inevitability, but rather on the potential not to. As Agamben says:

*Whoever already possesses know-ledge, by contrast, is not obliged to suffer an alteration; he is instead potential, Aristotle says, thanks to a hexis, a "having," on the basis of which he can also not bring his knowledge into actuality (me energein) by not making a work, for example. Thus the architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not write poems<sup>2</sup>.*

The potential work, in this light, exists as potential not on the basis of actuality, but rather by virtue of its capacity not to be. The potential work cannot be co-opted: it exists – at least theoretically – as contrary to dominant systems of exchange, for the potential work splits into a manifold of possibilities, each just as viable as the next. The potential work does not instantly sate or make concessions: it whets the appetite, remaining tantalisingly pregnant not only with potential, but the absence of potential, too. In such a way, it functions counter to expectations central to postmodernity: the Internet meme, the GIF, all of which assure instant gratification. Hardly more dissimilar to this, the space of waiting – for something, or nothing – is one of quiet rebellion. It is in this space that Nina Canell sites her work, in a space where potential is predicated not on being or actuality, but rather on the potential not to be, to slip back once again into the stuff of the world.

This potential *not to be* is at the heart of *O Little Drops*. The works come forward barely, marking out their space with the intermittent crackle of radio static, or the crystalline shimmer of salt. The works do not require viewer interaction, but the hint that somehow they might be impacted upon, by our presence, lingers. The central hub of the exhibition, *Into the Eyes as Ends of Hair* (2012), initially suggests not one, but two works: the smaller, a humble stone placed at the corner of the room, scarcely noticed. From this a thin copper wire unfurls from its mass, extending



high into the gallery space. The second component comprises a radio centrally placed on the gallery floor, its antenna extended by dendritic strands of copper, with a single nail hanging adrift at its culmination. Like streaks on an all-too slender windowpane, betraying its semblance of transparency, these copper lengths softly interrupt the space, fragmenting it almost invisibly. It is only on further study that one realises that this complex form, and that of the stone, are two parts of the same work: the former's thin stem of copper feeds into the larger work, and is a part of it. In such a way, the whole space between the two components is live with potential: the air is filled in with anticipation. The radio, its antenna lengthened with wire to traverse a large volume of space, occasionally hisses and crackles, but it gains its import not on the potential of noise, but rather of silence: it is only from the position of silence, of nothingness, that the concept of a happening might be grasped.

This form of potential might be described as Aristotle's *generic*: setting up the component parts, the situation, Canell leaves the work alone: whatever does or does not happen is determined by the situation itself, not by a subjective strain or effort that ensues *through* the situation. Whatever effort is demanded, on Canell's part, happens *prior* to the situation. Although fabricating the situation clearly explicates an actualised potential to make, paradoxically it finds its final articulation in a work that accommodates both actuality and non-actuality: the shadow of *nothingness* strangely reconciled with both creation and action.

This kind of generic potential, enacted throughout Canell's practice, can also be found in her two floor-based cloth works, both made in 2013 and sharing the title *Interiors (Salty)*. Here, the potential is one of materiality: the capacity of the materials used to flip and alter into new versions of themselves. Both pieces feature the manipulation of salt: that quotidian stratum of matter, unthought and ubiquitous. Canell uses the salt, diluted in water, as a means of transforming the physical structure of the cloths, which are pointedly those of the household or studio. Over time, the water evaporates from the cloths, leaving only the salt: sedimenting on their slight structures, it spills out onto the floor in a veneer of salty opalescence. The properties of the things themselves are exploited in making the work: they transfer and transform, becoming other.

An air of nostalgia pervades the work also, and by this a kind of counter-present yearning for a time when objects were mined for their resplendent potential: a time when they were still imbued with the potential to be meaningful and transformative. At this time, the logic of 'something else and something else',<sup>3</sup> dominates, with the result of a diminished capacity of the object to be meaningful: objects are disposable and inherently folding in towards obsolescence. Canell's objects recreate this capacity for meaning and transformation, and indeed yearn for it: what is *Mississippi River Blues* (2013) if not the lament of an era when static objects, in a process not dissimilar to magic, transformed unseen properties into yet more magic; that is, electricity. Now, the object is taken for granted: it is a placeholder for exchange, nothing more. It holds no intimacy.

*Another Indian Summer* (2012) also captures this nostalgic impulse: a crumpled up mass of neon, underfloor heating carpet and cable, requiring some 5000V to animate, the work's intentions are tantalisingly unclear. It cannot be quantified fully, the mass that it occupies or even the space that it would envelop. Perhaps it is in the process of shirking back towards itself, rather than distending

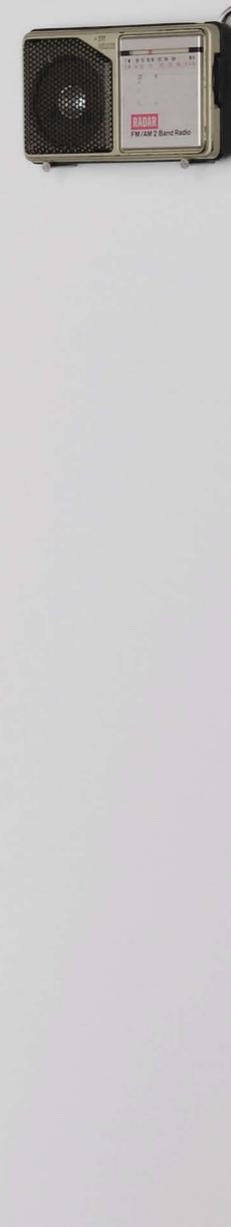


further. And the title, too: an Indian summer captures the great unexpectedness of childhood, the surprise of a summer come unseasonably late. But what of 'another' Indian summer? Is it possible to grow weary of them? Or is this the desire for 'another' Indian summer? Through these contradictory parallel readings, Canell's work points to the crux of nostalgia, the desire for a past that, being past, cannot be comprehensively circumscribed: considered, wearied nostalgia accommodates both a yearning for the past, and the understanding that this yearning is predicated on hollowness.

The writer's occupation, like that of the artist, is one interminably bordering on an *absence* of output: it negotiates the potential *not to write*, just as the artist battles her potential *not to make* works. This negotiation is based essentially on a choice: to write or make, or indeed not to. I, as a writer, have potential only when this potential not to write, ever present, is reconciled with actuality. As Agamben says, paraphrasing Aristotle, the potential *not to*, 'preserves itself as such in actuality. What is truly potential is thus what has exhausted all its impotentiality in bringing it wholly into the act as such.'<sup>4</sup> Thus, the artist acts as potential only when the omnipresent potential not to, is spent in the making of the work: it is surpassed by the actualization of not only potential, but impotentiality too. The potential work is always shaded by the figure of its unmade twin. Canell's works seem to be conscious of this fact, and of the potential *not to* central to the act of creating work. Found objects dominate *O Little Drops*, alongside the everyday paraphernalia of non-art processes. These objects and materials – cloth, radios, copper, neon, cables and stones – are always at the point of collapsing in towards non-art: tenderly, they make explicit the tremulous border between the potential *to be* and *not to be*.

This intersection is key to Canell's work. This space, like that of the corner, has the ability to reconcile various properties and planes of vision: to enable a transference or transformation between varying states. In *Soft Corner* (2013), Canell sets up a floor based situation, a composite of cables, copper and neon, plugged into the wall at the right hand extreme of the work. In the intersection of two walls, the cable, ensconced in copper, gives rise to a small sliver of neon that quickly retreats underneath the copper casing once again. Here, this corner alludes to the potentiality of the *in-between*, in the juncture of varying states and properties: it is here where she sites the transformative potentiality of matter.

The conceptual artist Douglas Huebler once said; '*The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add more.*'<sup>5</sup> Though Canell's work does of course give rise to objects, to me there is a clear unity between her logic, and that of Huebler's. For Canell does not really create objects, they surface and metamorphose in the situations she creates. Her use of found objects re-iterates this rationale: in them, she perceives an ecological solution to a contemporaneous vertigo of the object: a small counter-move vis-à-vis its smothered capacity for meaning. By the situations she enacts, using the worn down or modified language of everyday objecthood, Canell creates states of potential, but ones based crucially on the potential not to be. Her objects deny the monolith, and alongside it any overarching statement about the state of the world. They come into being barely, reconciling themselves with their just as likely non-being or non-happening. They are surprised, almost self-conscious in their improbability, and all the more affective for it. They are also catalysts of surprise: the chromed radio, its antenna extended to almost ludic proportions,



but paradoxically cast in bronze (*Strays*, 2013). Like the text that is written, anxiously coming into being – in spite of its omnipotent potential *not to be* – Canell's works surprise and appear surprised in equal measure: they bypass the desire of objects to be meaningful by tapping their energies, their potential. More objects, Canell seems to say, cannot counter the deleterious shift towards empty objects. Rather, what is needed is to listen and rework those that already exist, accommodating in them their potential slippage *not to be*. By this action, the objects address us once again, and a space of meaningfulness is reclaimed.

<sup>1</sup> Agamben *Potentialities in Potentialities* (1999), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, pg. 177-185

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 179

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Buchanan *Build a wall or be a room* (2008) Table, Video 8:02 min, dimensions variable. Exhibited in *Built with love.*, 6 March - 13 April 2013, mother's tankstation

<sup>4</sup> Ibid i, pg. 183

<sup>5</sup> This formed a part of Huebler's artist statement for the Seth Siegelau Gallery, New York, in January 1969. The full text can be found at [http://www.ubu.com/papers/huebler\\_statements.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/huebler_statements.html), accessed 17/5/13

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Nina Canell *O Little Drops* Installation view mother's tankstation 2013