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## Free-Space Path Loss

Nina Casell is a sculptor whose working vocabulary ranges from concrete materials to mutable substances. She has a distinct penchant for the in-between, for micro-phenomena, for the imperceptible but felt, as well as for conductors, or non-conduction that might forcibly transform into conductors, and for materials that have specific uses, have often been used, are visibly marked by the history of that use and, as such, ultimately form part of a process of which her work is a direct result.

Casell's practice can be loosely located in an art-historical trajectory that begins with Duchamp's quasi-epistemological interest in the unseen, in between and transitional as articulated in his theory of the *infra-thin* (*infra-thin*)<sup>1</sup> and later on, in the 1960s and '70s, continues with process based art, Arte Povera and its preoccupation with industrial and raw materials, and a whole ethos of utopian-attuned practitioners who sought to empirically apply scientific and theoretical principles or models to art.<sup>2</sup> However, Casell's work differs from this ethos significantly, not only in terms of her lack of corrective or prescriptive utopianism, or in some cases critical dystopianism, but also by virtue of the radically different period and technological paradigm in which she is operating.

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but this is largely mistaken, as her processes are thoroughly grounded in empirical phenomena, or, we might say, cause. If I say 'largely mistaken' it is because Canell's work has an appreciably complex relationship with allegory and metaphor (and anything that renders itself vulnerable to allegory can never completely eschew the metaphysical).<sup>3</sup> Like great literature<sup>4</sup>, her work at once actively courts and rejects allegory and metaphor. Generously welcoming the flame of interpretability, it never definitively burns out into single interpretation.

It does this, I would argue, by insistently foregrounding the material and processual qualities of its composition. This happens, most importantly, in the meticulous captions and descriptions that invariably accompany the work.<sup>5</sup> These include material and process as much as any phenomena the work might seek to contain (whenever electricity is used, for instance, the exact level of voltage is always indicated). Nothing is left to chance; the indolent imp of vagueness is never allowed anywhere near Canell's practice. And this prohibition, in turn, has a distinct way of forestalling any metaphysical and allegorical flights of fancy that might flatten what she does into moral or philosophical servitude or, even worse, platitude.

So what then, if anything, is this work about? If, on one hand, it is marked by a certain irreducibility, which is both material and phenomenological – never being anything other than itself – then, on the other hand, it does indeed traffic in metaphor and, as I already said, tinker, if obliquely (always obliquely), with allegory. Consider, first and foremost, the title of the exhibition itself: *Free-Space Path Loss*. To all appearances this title seems to be a perfect contradiction, describing a situation that can be valorised either positively (free-space!) or negatively (path loss).

Not mere poetry (which is to say, not only poetic), this is actually a specific term that describes a telecommunicational equation, which, to quote the artist's deft summary: 'refers to a kind of thinning or dispersal of a signal when travelling in "free space" (such as air).'<sup>6</sup> Thus the title speaks as much to a

specific side-effect of telecommunication as it does to a loss that is liable to attend communication in general perhaps, not essential to its make up, but part of its process. Confounding presuppositions about direct contact or speech, as if it were somehow more efficacious or limpid when unimpeded by obstacles, but merely supposedly lubricated by or perfectly mediated by air, FSPL is the direct consequence of a signal becoming eroded by air itself.

It might seem ironic then that the eponymous work *Free-Space Path Loss* (2014) is fashioned out of one of the better materials for conduction, copper. The work consists of a copper frame, with saturated colorations created by applied heat as well as oxidised fingerprints. Its apparent irony rapidly dissipates into the traces, and therefore the infinitesimal loss of those things that have come into contact with it: heat and the human body.<sup>7</sup> While the human body conducts the work to its place, heat passes through it but not without at once permanently shedding a measure of itself onto and modifying the thing through which it passed.

By the same token, these traces arguably distill the notion of indexicality to its essence – even in so far as they are partially registered through the fingertip's imprint. Testifying to the classical catch phrase of indexicality, which is 'this happened' or 'someone was here', these indexical marks contain or figure nothing more than their own index. In other words, they pointedly point to a presence as much to an absence. And yet for all that, the copper frame is in fact empty, framing nothing, and as such it remains open: framing a free space, as it were.

This preoccupation with free space crops up throughout Canell's practice on numerous occasions, but never without doubting the principle or supposition that anything can ever be unencumbered by matter, or perhaps better yet by media (as in medium). If there is any one constant or fundamental article of faith (an article of faith that is also a principle of scepticism) that drives her work, it is the belief that the tangible world is encompassed by manifold intangible phenomena whose intangibility is only a matter of register, mode of perception or time. It

is perhaps not surprising then that the density and materiality of a supposedly ethereal substance also known to erode radio signals – air – is something of a recurring volume in Canell's oeuvre.

It figures, in congealed form<sup>8</sup>, in the work *Interiors (Condensed)* (2013). Comprised of a carpet with a drinking glass partially filled with fragments of congealed air at its centre, this work is laden with paradoxes of interiority and (in)accessibility. Interiors within interiors: the carpet itself, of course, refers to the domestic interior, meanwhile at the exact centre (interior) of the carpet is the glass, and then inside it is that which is generally supposed to be exterior to it as well. In a gesture that at once moves inward and outward, *Interiors (Condensed)* formally renders air inaccessible by both hardening and localising it in such way that what is not normally visible is becomes visible only at a distance. This procedure of graduating interiors immediately refers, in a kind of counter-movement, to everything that is outside of it.

It does so in such a way that it all but reverses the procedure, so to speak, of the graduating interiors, ramifying outward. For not only does it refer to the architecture that contains it – it is inside the building, in its interior – but also refers to the air outside of the glass, which contains not only the body viewing it, but the building as well. In other words, both viewer and the building are technically inside what is inside the glass, if not, by a somersault of association, inside the glass itself. (This work only becomes stranger when there is more than one body in the space and the glass then contains, by dint of the same association, an interconnected plurality of people.)

That this work, incidentally, is about the architecture and the body as much as it is about air is belied by its very composition, which refers back to both through their very absence. (The carpet goes inside, while it is walked on and a glass is held in the hand.) Although not so much linked to allegory or metaphor, this piece also contains an instance of Canell's cherished irreducibility, and this is also attended by paradox<sup>9</sup>: that which is in

air into it. The oxygen level within this space has been raised by 3%. Now, whether or not this can be distinctly felt or perceived is one thing, but whatever the case may be, it has a way of underlining the presence of the body, heightening, if only through suspicion, an awareness of the experiencing body – of the body that, incidentally, underlines the work, and hence the space containing the work itself.

To circle back to the beginning of this text and finally conclude, this continual, if surreptitious reference to the body and, more than I think about, the container, elaborates the paradoxes and contradictions touched upon at the outset of this text. Not only does the body contain and root the empirical experience of the world in the world (the empirical is inseparable from the experiencing body), it also holds and transports the mind to the imagination that extends from that same world. In this sense, the body could be considered a receptacle, that which stores, but also that which receives back (re-septum, as the word's Latin origin implies).

The works I have described – the frame, the drinking glass, the passage, the sock and cables – as well as other new works in the exhibition are all receptacles, objects that have held and hold anew, objects that receive back – sculptors that sculpt, poured into they pour back, that add and subtract, send and return. This conflation of absence and presence is integral to the logic of intractability that I mentioned earlier. Now Canall suggests the increasingly efficient usage of free space in between objects and bodies, the apparent emptiness that is her abundant empiricism. She holds the there to be not there and the here to be not here: not in order to delude and diminish that space, but rather to enrich and multiply it.

Chris Sharp

## Notes

1. Numerically difficult to define, the *apertures*, Duchamp claimed, could only be illustrated through examples. To wit: the smoothness of a seat (that has just been left) is equivalent to the smoothness of a chair (which is not) – or, as he put it, the smoothness of a seat (that has just been left) is equivalent to the smoothness of a chair (which is not) – or, as he put it, the smoothness of a seat (that has just been left) is equivalent to the smoothness of a chair (which is not).
2. I'm thinking in particular of the films of Robert Rauschenberg, Gordon Matta-Clark, Jean Dewasne and Victor Grieco.
3. Take, for instance, Kafka, Beckett and even Claude Lorraine, all of whom are perfect examples of the intersectional dialogue with nature and the metaphysical, from Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (the *Umwelt* of the *Umwelt*) to Beckett's *Quad* (the *Umwelt* of the *Umwelt*) to Lorraine, when she famously writes: "You see, vision consisted of surpassing the symbol of the thing in the thing itself."
4. I'm not the first to use this simile when attempting to describe what Canall does. See Fredrik Liew's characterization in the press release for the exhibition 'Mid Sentence' at Moderna Museet in Stockholm.
5. As a matter of fact, I was surprised to the point of bewilderment by the accuracy and thoroughness of the material descriptions that accompanied the publication of the exhibition 'Mid Sentence' at Moderna Museet, titled *Some Notes on Chairs*. Although some were used by Canall for sculptures, such representation is a formal technical drawing of a cable that exists. The caption includes an exhaustive description of the material layers of the cable as well as its exact diameter. Indeed, I confess to feeling a certain queasiness before such particularism, as if it were somehow grotesque. That said, I'm not sure if my queasiness issues from the fact that these exposed details are a violation of human interiority – one thinks, inevitably, of the post-structuralism of Paul Thorez – or from the almost, very particular, precision with which the cable's tissues are represented. Although I'm aware that a similar notion of the seat should not be ruled out.
6. From an email sent by the artist in October 2014.
7. Strictly speaking, it would be more correct to refer to the *limb* part of the body being behind not as an *intra*mental loss of that body, but rather as an *inter*mental, if spectral, multiplication of that body.
8. That is, 22% air and 78% nitrogen dioxide.
9. A paradox, it just happens, that could also be read as a metaphor of Canall's relationship to intractability: a metaphor of metaphor.
10. From an email sent by the artist in January 2014.
11. See, for example, Bruno Latour's *WJ: After Newt* (2001) or the work of the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.