

CROSSTALK  
DIETER  
ROELSTRAETE  
MONIKA  
SZEWCZYK

A CONVERSATION

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MONIKA SZEWCZYK: As any words committed to paper, in a publication like this one, are bound to be understood as somehow ‘framing’ the work of the artist, why don’t we start with that peculiar pure copper frame that Nina Canell presented in her exhibition at Midway Contemporary. What do you make of this frame without a picture? Is it a nod to Derrida, for whom the ‘truth in painting’ resides precisely in the frame? The frame tells us where to look and paradoxically becomes invisible—a notion that can be extended to art in general. By making the frame the central visual and physical feature of this work—a lovingly forged object gleaming in a myriad colors brought to the surface by the intense heating process—Nina certainly points to the thingness of the picture, its sculptural dimension. But also, with nothing within the frame that would remotely resemble an image, the question of framing invisible things (such as intuition, insight, and other intangibles) comes to the fore. In a previous essay, you invoked “la fée électricité” in relation to Nina’s work, tracing an entire circuit of connections between women and electricity in the process.<sup>1</sup> I want to take this line of thinking some steps further and down a slightly wayward path, towards the consideration of invisible forces in general, of which electricity is an important example. Fairies are a perfect place to think about this. Indeed, from the World Wide Web we learn that, “Edward Garner argued that fairies are allied to the butterfly genus, and are made of a substance lighter than gas which renders them invisible to human beings (except clairvoyants).”<sup>2</sup> The Theosophists argued passionately about how many fairies fit on the head of a pin. In the Midway exhibition, there were several works, which existed on the edge of visibility. And all this makes me wonder: are we entering a strange realm of in-visual art?

DIETER ROELSTRAETE: I want to start by responding to your remark about the empty copper frame. That work definitely caught my attention for the same reasons that led you to conjure the specter of Derrida—not someone I had ever

expected to bring up, or see brought up, in a Nina Canell-themed conversation I must say. The empty, pictureless frame is such a classic postmodern trope—it was quite strange to see it appear so demonstratively in Nina’s work, which we do not exactly associate with the theorization of postmodernism. And then there’s the complimentary insinuation of the pictorial taking precedence over the sculptural—frames are made for isolating *images* after all, and the image is another notion that until now has not featured very prominently in my thinking around Nina’s work. Which leads us to the second part of your opening salvo, concerning the in-visual and the in-visible—we only have to think of her recurring interest in ephemeral phenomena such as winds, waves and wavelengths to realize how much this matters to her work as a ‘visual’ artist. The little tone generator put out of sight on one of the beams supporting the roof of Midway made me think back of an anecdote that I’m fond of recalling, dating back to my days as a museum guide in the SMAK in Ghent: I once toured a group of visitors around a Stanley Brouwn show and there was one pristinely lit empty room with one work in it, supposedly in the dead center of the space—an invisible cube (the work was actually titled *In the middle of this room, there is an imaginary cube, measuring 1000mm x 1000mm x 1000mm*). I distinctly remember making the same joke every time, telling people not to stand on the cube in the middle of the room—they never failed to scurry away, caught in the act as it were. It seems appropriate to bring Brouwn’s work up in this context, what with his obsession with measurement and spacing... I’m intrigued by your mentioning the quasi-unmentionable though—*intuition*. In a conversation with Nina I had brought up the related notion of the poetic and that did not seem to be a description she was comfortable with, yet the intuitive somehow managed to make the cut. Can we take the notion of intuition apart some more?

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MONIKA SZEWCZYK: Well... That would be the counter-intuitive thing to do. It is so difficult to *speak about* intuition—which

does not mean we cannot use it, of course. I’ll tell you what made me think about invisibility in Nina’s work. It all started with the corners. I’ve had this hunch that she pays particular attention to corners in installing her work, and when looking at the show in Midway, I pointed to the culmination of her copper array in *Softer Corner* and said something to that effect: “With Nina you really have to watch the corners.” I just blurted it out, thinking out loud, though it came out with the somewhat pompous authority of a maxim. But John Rasmussen looked at me somewhat excitedly: “Well, you haven’t seen the best part.” And he proceeded to lead me to a corner that did not appear to be a point of focus at first glance, but upon closer inspection yielded two tiny sculptures: one a fossilized piece of chewing gum, the other a perfect concrete cast of the latter, placed side by side. They are called, or it is called, *Remembrance (Colourless)*. An ant had crawled on top of them at the exact moment that we approached, which drove home the very sculptural problem of scale with hilarious oomph. I’m tempted to say that there is something in the way Nina works that relies on, and even triggers, instinctive knowledge. I think maybe this is what you were aiming at when you brought up poetry. I read your comment as an acknowledgment of something that did not obey the usual grammar of space. But of course, sometimes when you tell an artist that their work is one thing, their instinct will be to disagree. It adds a little spice to the conversation. Nina has this quietly playful way with people, as well as insects. Noticing the ant she promptly told it to get off her work. If the poetic and the intuitive are related, which I do think they are, perhaps the poetic is more about the verbal and the intuitive is about a kind of silence. A particularly kind of full silence—the empty frame, the frequency just beyond human perception—pervades her work; which presents an interesting problem: How does one carry on a conversation about the work, keep thinking out-loud, as it were? Or am I just conjuring this “will to silence” the way Stanley Brouwn conjured his cube?

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DIETER ROELSTRAETE: I'd like to pick up on your question of continuing the conversation—of keeping discourse flowing, so to speak, of *telecommunication*. A sculpture consisting of a tone generator tuned out of the reach of human hearing; the despondent, wilting antenna in a work like *Strays*, a smattering of disjointed copper tubes, of the kind that we customarily assume to contain either fluids and gases or electric wire and telephone cables... 'Communication'—or the lack, even impossibility thereof—does seem to be a recurring concern in her work, which is one reason why I think it's not so inappropriate to talk about the work in poetic terms—poetry is perhaps the one mode of language that is not directly subservient to communication: words scattered on a page, like objects in a room. Rather than express or communicate meaning, you could say they conjure a certain *atmosphere* (I like the verb 'conjuring' by the way—it's the right verb to invoke in a discussion of Nina's work). Now I've talked about the physical, material conditions of communication as a form of *connection* elsewhere in relation to Nina's work, namely in my observations concerning the profusion of cables and cabling in her art. Cables, threads, wires, as symbols for both connecting and communicating; cycles and circular movements; indeed, the very notion of re-cycling and transformation—these are all elements that are addressed quite literally in her practice, and there's a nicely paradoxical charge inherent in the image of the cable as that which both promises unprecedented mobility and forever ties us to the land, to the ground, to the elements. The cable, as you well know, completely freaks me out.

MONIKA SZEWCZYK: Oh yes!

DIETER ROELSTRAETE: I hate cables—they make me feel like a modern-day Laocoon. They always get mixed up, you're always getting stuck in them, and this becomes all the more ironic (not in a philosophically interesting way though) when these cables belong to the very machines that are supposed to

enhance mobility, to put us in constant contact with the world. Anyway—I'm going off on a tangent here. But then again, tangential thinking may be exactly the kind of thinking that looking at Nina's work requires. In any case, there is definitely something in the work that speaks to our contemporary condition of mobility-mad paralysis. The blackout performance involving a collective of collectors,<sup>3</sup> for instance, is really about coming to a complete and utter standstill—about disconnecting people rather than connecting them, as the motto of a once thriving telecommunications behemoth has it. Would you agree that, if the work is meant to communicate anything at all, it is primarily the fragility or even futility of all communication? Perhaps this is also what one can see 'behind' the glass pane inside the empty frame.

MONIKA SZEWCZYK: That's certainly a tempting thought. I am writing this as I glance out of our window at a giant telephone pole. You'll recall that my mother told us not to move close to such a strong electromagnetic force and regardless of whether or not she overstated the case, on certain evenings, when the neighborhood gets quiet, I can hear the wires buzzing with activity on our T-shaped totem of communication. It's a white noise that I would love to eliminate. Nina, on the other hand, seems to enjoy constructing or deconstructing spaces where this noise exists, just out of, or right on the edge of, human sensory perception, of actuality and imagination. Here perhaps is where *extra-sensory* perception kicks in. And this is perhaps best felt when there is a frame of some sort for it. Those collectors must experience something of this sort as they come to know for certain that nine other households, out of sight (and previously out of mind), are experiencing a similar suspension of white noise. The quiet is so beautiful when the power goes out in a home that it is sometimes difficult to remember to panic. And one might feel a sly sense of camaraderie with all the other dark spaces in the neighborhood. (That camaraderie can now be confirmed via mobile phone, but I still remember when the

P. 55 phones also went out as the power did.) You touched upon the multitude of material conductors that Nina brings forth in the gallery. I would add that she also somehow sculpts the forces that do not have a material substance, even if they cannot be separated from physical conductors here and there. So this is not just a matter of the invisible, with which we started out, but also the intangible and the inaudible as well. *Stray Warmings*—what a strange combination of words, which do indeed speak of that scattering you ascribe to poetry. And also, of temperature, weather, atmosphere... all of which are things at the edge of tangibility that are difficult to verbalize and (maybe therefore) also to feel. Rather than the futility of communication, maybe we have to consider its *fragility*...

DIETER ROELSTRAETE: Or its precariousness—in the literal sense of something that is (I'm quoting from an online dictionary here) “not securely held or in position,” something that is “dangerously likely to fall or collapse” (as opposed to the more theoretically fashionable notion of precarity understood as the condition of economic uncertainty dependent on something that is made to look like chance—although it wouldn't be unreasonable to read the semantic side-effects of some of her work in those terms). Precariousness as a quintessentially sculptural quality, in other words—art as a balancing act, not just in sheer material terms, but also in terms of saying neither too much nor too little. In this regard, and also with regards to your observations about the ‘meteorological’ dimension of Nina's work—its freewheeling, light-footed quotations from the language of thermodynamics and entropy—a term that I've been meaning to bring up is that of *compression*: the notion of the art work as a *concentrate*—the vanishing point in the middle of a widening web of concentric circles that operate as force fields of materiality and meaning. Which is exactly what I hear echo in a sonorous quote by Steven Connor that Nina shared with us in Minneapolis—reflecting on the marvel of copper, cables, and wiring, Connor speaks of an “infinite force moving

through near-infinite littleness.” It's not a bad characterization of what she does as an artist, really: striking the balance between two infinities. It just about fits this room.

- 1 I refer here to ‘Nina Canell Plus Electricity’ by Dieter Roelstraete, from “To Let Stay Projecting As A Bit Of Branch On A Log By Not Chopping It Off;” published by Mumok and Walther König Books, 2010.
- 2 <http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/rrfairies.html>.
- 3 The intervention “Black Light (For 10 Performers)” is further dissected in the above mentioned essay.