

# ART WORLD

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Homage to Duchamp

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The rise of a generation

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# Katie Paterson

“Remote geological places and the landscape in general can be insurmountably distant, but absolutely close in the imagination”



1 **Vatnajökull (the sound of)** (2007–08), hydrophone, mobile phone, DE500, white neon

2 **Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull** (2007), 3 digital films, 1h57m

3 **Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)** (2007), E.M.E transmitter/receiver, Disklavier grand piano

4 **Earth-Moon-Earth (4'33'')** (2007), E.M.E transmitter/receiver

KATIE PATERSON is a recent Slade graduate whose minimal works are singular, yet binary: they embrace black and white sound and silence, macro and micro. Her 2007 graduation piece, *Vatnajökull* (the sound of), invited viewers to phone a microphone suspended in a decaying Icelandic glacier (see *Art World* issue 1). For the companion piece, *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull* (2007), she recorded and collected meltwater from these three glaciers, to create records of ice that played their own grinding death-cry until they melted. *Earth – Moon – Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)* and *Earth – Moon – Earth (4'33'')* (2007) are radio transmissions in which Paterson sent two musical classics to the moon and back in Morse code: the yearning first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight* sonata, and John Cage's notorious *4'33''* (four minutes and 33 seconds of silence). The messages returned fragmented, their information lost in the moon's craters. In the case of the Beethoven, the received code was translated into a fragile, halting version of the original score, tinkling ethereally from a self-playing grand piano. **INTERVIEW:** *Carla Yurish*

**Paterson is very Scottish – can you trace your family far back?**

Going far back, I believe there is a history of “travelling people” in my family.

**Vatnajökull (the sound of) was sponsored by Virgin Mobile. How does sponsorship affect your work?**

I had the idea that I wanted to phone a glacier, realised this could be difficult, and called the head of PR at Virgin Mobile. I was a student with no money, but there was more to it – the idea of using a telephone line was so that people anywhere could dial one number, and get through to this glacier, one at a time – universal in a sense, but accessed individually. For the work to function on a global level, the phone number had to be distributed worldwide. So I sought a sponsor that would seek to generate the kind of publicity that would make this happen.

**You also turned the glacial water into ice records. Do you want to make more works that overlap or evolve?**

My works aren't static, they take different forms depending on each context – they have beginnings, but I don't think of them as having end points as such. The silence I transmitted to the moon, perhaps it's still out there, evolving, maybe even mingling with the missing notes from the sonata...

**How does a day in the studio unfold?**

There isn't really a typical day. I have a great deal of communication with people via email, from many different fields, all over the world. For the project I'm working on now – a map of all the dead stars in the universe – I've been in touch with hundreds of supernova hunters, astronomers, physicists and software engineers, learning more about this vast subject, and compiling a huge list of gamma

ray bursts, supernovae remnants, stellar black holes etc – there are over 27,000. Though there is usually a simple idea at the core, the amount of work each project demands can become quite daunting. There are many disparate daily activities, from translating the *Moonlight* sonata into Morse code, finding out about a battery's lifespan at minus 10 degrees, to calculating the distance of the earth to the furthest exploded star, and remembering to order warm socks. My work takes me to many incredible places: sending silence to the moon from mountains in Japan; collecting water from disappearing Icelandic glaciers and camping by their edge; late-night trips to lightbulb factories in Slovakia...

**You've catapulted snow from 100 trees, recording the sound of it landing, and made black fireworks which would ignite unseen against the night sky. Again these encompass sound and distance, black and white, ephemerality...**

The snow shooting and black fireworks can be thought of like drawing: these works draw in space through an act of taking away (trees minus snow) or adding an invisible presence (black fireworks against a dark sky), but while they subtract in space they also add in the imagination. Maybe this is the link between much of my work, a presence withheld or made invisible, and absences produced, and made visible or audible. Perhaps this is why I work with remote geological places and in the landscape in general – they can be insurmountably distant but absolutely close in the imagination.

**Do you have any musical training?**

No musical training. Sound is prevalent in several works, but I wouldn't distinguish sound from the visual. In my *Albion* show when the door was opened it triggered the

sound of a dying star through a small horn speaker, which is pathetic and almost inaudible [see opposite page].

**Are you scientifically minded?**

Not as such. With the *moonlight bulb*, I was interested in how scientific measurements of light (the colour temperature, etc) could be applied to simulate this natural phenomenon and how something as ineffable as moonlight could be captured, hoarded and re-distributed. I sensed that moonlight has a special quality, both in a literal and metaphorical sense, and wondered if it would be possible to capture something so ephemeral, and transform it into an object.

**What is your connection to landscape?**

I'm interested in the interconnectedness of our relationship to the landscape, the interaction of parts within the whole. Whilst I can comprehend that “we are the landscape”, made of the “same stuff”, at the same time I feel an insurmountable distance from it. With *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull*, I was thinking of the scale of these vast geological forms in relation to the human being – a “human scaled” glacier the size of an LP, on a “human” time scale. The material, in a sense, is a kind of access point to a time beyond us – a geological time. It's also to do with the failure of attempting to access something inconceivable using everyday materials, like mobile phones, that are fallible and likely to break down.

**Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?**

Alighiero Boetti's *Yearly Lamp* (1966) [which randomly switches on for 11 seconds a year]

*Exhibition (group show):* *Altermodern: Tate Triennial 2009, Tate Britain, 3 Feb–26 Apr, 2009: www.tate.org.uk*

**CV** Born: 1981, Glasgow, Scotland Studied: Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland; Slade School of Fine Art, London Lives and works: London Represented: *Albion, London* Artist's Website: [www.katiepaterson.org](http://www.katiepaterson.org)

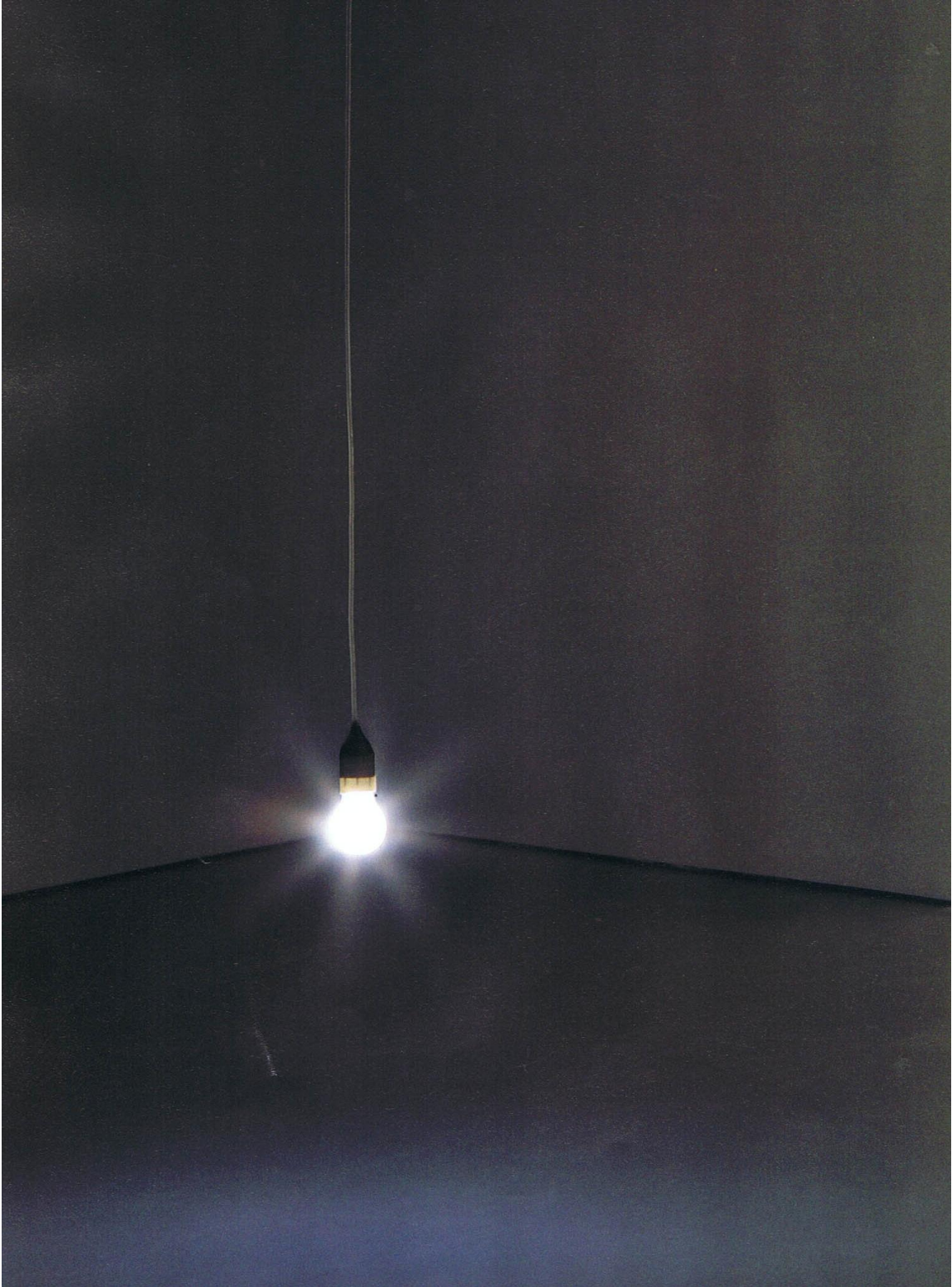


Opening the door to Katie Paterson's recent show at London's Albion Gallery, the visitor triggered a tiny hum: the sound of a dying star. The digital simulation was created by Professor Adam Burrows of the University of Arizona, to illustrate his controversial new theory that it is the sound waves (as opposed to neutrinos) produced by collapsing stars which trigger them to explode into massive supernovae. "I learnt recently that when a supernova Type II ends its life, it shines as brightly as 100 billion suns," comments Paterson. "For a few weeks or months that single exploding star shines brighter than all of the stars in its galaxy combined. The death of stars really is the cycle of life and death in the universe. Stars make the heavier elements needed to form planets and build life. Without the death of stars, there would be no life, no humans."

**Inset: Sound of a Dying Star** (2008), sensor, control unit, horn speaker, 1.14s

**Main image:** A view of the Helix nebula, the gaseous remains of a dying star







Paterson collaborated with Dieter Lung, Physicist and Innovation Manager for OSRAM, Germany, who tested variables such as colour temperature and the spectrum of moonlight to create an accurate simulation of moonlight for these bulbs – the effect of which is calming and ghostly. The moonlight bulbs were produced as sets of “lifetimes” – 289 bulbs in each set, totaling 578,000 hours of moonlight, or the average lifespan of a human being today. “A different number is inscribed into each bulb, and I will supply a logbook with each set,” explains Paterson. “The owner will be asked to record the date each bulb is turned on, and the date it ends its life. This object and experience becomes the starting point of an ongoing engagement with the idea of moonlight that the owner of the work enters into, and the history of their experience of the light becomes a part of the work. I’d like to reclaim the dead moonlight... but perhaps I will be gone by the time they are.”

Above: Katie Paterson examines a batch of her “moonlight” bulbs at OSRAM’s factory

Main image, left: **Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight** (2008), light bulb with halogen filament, frosted coloured shell, 28W, 4500K

Main image, below: **Lifetime of Moonlight** (2008), 289 moonlight bulbs

