INTRODUCING
KATIE PATERSON

This London artist explores connectivity by way of moonlight, melting glaciers, and dead stars. By **Sally O'Reilly**

Katie Paterson in her studio, London, 2008.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Still from *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull*, 2007. Three digital films, 1 hr 57 min.

Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight, 2008. 289 lightbulbs with halogen filaments, frosted colored shells, 28W, 4500K.

Earth–Moon–Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon), 2007. EME transmitter/receiver, Disklavier grand piano. Installation view, Slade School of Fine Art, London, 2007.

Vatnajökull (the sound of), 2007–08. Hydrophone, mobile phone, DE500, white neon. Installation view, Modern Art Oxford, 2008.

Earth–Moon–Earth (4'33"), 2007. EME transmitter/receiver.

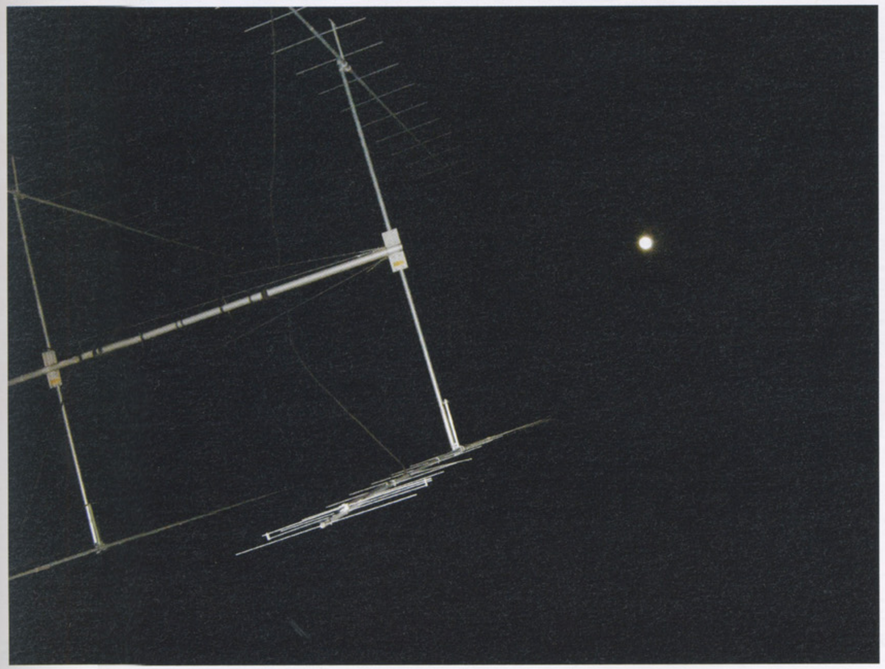
Vatnajökull (the sound of), 2007–08. Hydrophone, mobile phone, DE500.

A player piano renders the familiar strains of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, but the melody contains errors, missing notes, incomplete phrases. Without a human hand to perform these mistakes, one can only surmise that the score has been somehow nibbled at, like a moth-eaten sweater. Indeed, the piano in Katie Paterson's *Earth–Moon–Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)* (2007) plays a tune that has undergone a series of absurd and poetic transformations. Beethoven's notes (strictly speaking, their letter names) were translated into Morse code, then transmitted via radio to bounce off the surface of the moon. The returning signal was reconstituted as a musical score and the piano programmed accordingly. Though the tune is instantly recognizable, such transmutations, along with the player piano's mechanized rendition, quash the sonata's romantic nuances. The degradation has occurred in the void between earth and moon, but the enduring image is that of the missing notes abandoned on the moon's surface, echoing through its craters and serenading unknown life forms.

The piece was part of the 27-year-old London-based artist's first solo exhibition at Modern Art Oxford. Alongside *Earth–Moon–Earth* was a neon telephone number inviting the viewer to experience *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* (2007–08). Call the number and you are connected to a microphone plunged in the meltwater of an Icelandic glacier. To hear the cracking and gushing of the polar ice cap is a sobering and exhilarating experience; that telecommunication can collapse distance and yet leave it ultimately intact is a delicately phenomenal thought. While these works look very much like gallery-based art, their implications pull us in all directions—to the moon and back, and then to one of the most alien landscapes on earth—making us feel at once powerful and pathetic.

To actualize a project as ambitious as *Vatnajökull*, Paterson relied on Icelandic locals to advise on location, employed technicians to configure the equipment, and sought financial support from the telephone network provider Virgin Media. Working with a corporate entity such as Virgin presented issues that don't usually encroach on an artist's decision-making processes, but such businesslike negotiations are becoming a more involved aspect of Paterson's process. For *Earth–Moon–Earth*, for instance, she worked with amateur radio enthusiasts, known as "moonbouncers," who regularly bounce messages off the moon, thereby utilizing an existing network to generate unconventional content. *Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight* (2008), however, required rather more high-end laboratory and manufacturing assistance. Paterson approached OSRAM, a manufacturer of daylight bulbs, to develop and produce a bulb that emitted the quality of light of a full moon. An engineer took light-meter readings, plotted graphs, and tweaked variables to find an accurate reconstruction of wavelength and amperage, an appropriate color coating for the bulb, and so on, to produce a light with muted, silvery qualities. A factory line manufactured the bulb in an edition of 289, which, if each bulb were left to burn until spent and then changed for the next, would last 66 years—the global average human life span.

By working with the immanent qualities of objects and the meanings they release through usage, Paterson avoids a didactic or proselytizing tone. *Vatnajökull*, for instance, has obvious ecological overtones; yet using a cell phone to connect to a melting glacier is far from bucolic. Like the replicated romance of the *Moonlight Sonata*, the piece pivots on what appears to be a tool for connectivity revealing itself as one of alienation. The concertina-ing of distance produces an illusion of closeness that ultimately gives way to a realization of its impossibility.



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Just as the banal lightbulb and mobile telephone harbor weighty notions of life and death, distance and connectivity, the ordinary record players in *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull* (2007) release associations of a remote and sublime landscape. Water collected from Icelandic glaciers has been made into frozen records and pressed with a sound recording of the water trickling and gushing in situ. The records contain the promise of fidelity, but when they're played, their crystalline surface interferes with the recorded source sound so that we hear both the distant melting glacier and the grooved ice before us, rather like a painting on the cusp between figuration and abstraction.

Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull is presented as a three-channel video installation that concentrates divergent time frames—the human time of the journey to the glacier and the geological time of its ancient presence—into a two-hour period over which the records play and melt. Paterson's current project extends beyond even geological time and involves working with international academic astrophysicists and amateur astronomers to collect and map the coordinates of dead stars. Although supernovae and other stellar events visible through telescopes are continually noted by sky watchers the world over, Paterson's attempt to collate them is doomed to failure from the start, as the extent of the universe remains unquantifiable and astronomers' sightings will be forever incomplete. The vast numbers involved—the trillions of light-years, the bezillions of stars and galaxies—induces slight nausea; that news of these cataclysmic events is reaching our planet tens of billions of years after the fact places humanity in a humbling, diminutive position. Paterson's themes are immense, and her processes ambitiously connective, yet she wields a sensibility that preserves the human poetics of grandeur without buckling under its metaphysical weight. ✦

KATIE PATERSON'S WORK IS ON VIEW IN "ALTERMODERN: TATE TRIENNIAL 2009" AT TATE BRITAIN, LONDON, THROUGH APR. 26.