

# WILD SKY



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CANTZ



I don't recall the moment when I saw the disaster on television. I can only remember the discussions that came afterward, on the playground and in the school bus, the retelling of the explosion through gestures and jokes. (What does NASA stand for? Need another seven astronauts.) Privately, I struggled to imagine what it must have felt like inside the cockpit, the concussion of the explosion, the final impact with the sea.<sup>1</sup> Until that moment, I had assumed that I would one day travel to outer space, that I would gaze at the Horsehead Nebula through the visor of my space helmet. It hadn't occurred to me that the career of an astronaut could be so risky.

*Wild Sky* is an exhibition about the cosmos for people who will likely never leave the stratosphere. We may be grounded, but we can see the universe more fully and clearly than ever, thanks to unmanned spacecraft, gravitational wave telescopes, and radio dishes. Such technological advances have led to profound insights about hitherto unknown parts of the universe, and to staggering images of the cosmos. Thanks to our cybernetic eyes, we can

travel to outer space after all, through the image.

In contrast with the increasingly sophisticated scientific images of the universe, the artists in *Wild Sky* employ imagery that foregrounds its own limitations. Supernovae are represented by colored confetti. Sunsets are distorted to the point of near abstraction. Smudged dry-erase boards stand in for nebulae, and dandruff is taken for astral bodies. In these images of limitless, incomprehensible phenomena, we encounter the conditions that shape our own roles as human observers in a rationalized, "high-tech" world.

### IMPOSSIBLE MAPS

In her work *All the Dead Stars*, artist Katie Paterson worked with approximately one hundred astrophysicists and astronomers to compile data about every dead star that has been observed by humans—about 27,000 of them. Each star has been etched onto black anodized aluminum, a single dot among many on a two-by-three-meter map. The earth is used as a frame of reference: the dead stars are laid over a faint outline of latitude and longitude lines, a de-materialized globe surrounded by astral death.

As monumental as the work is—it takes five people to move

it into place—it does not come close to representing its subject in its entirety. There are billions of dead stars in the universe; another star explodes every couple of seconds. The title of Paterson's map—*All the Dead Stars*—implies a completeness that could never be achieved. But of course all the best collections can never be completed; the unfinished project of mapping the stars is an index of our own unfinished lives, a way of deferring mortality. At the same time, Paterson's work reminds us of our human frailty in the face of a chaotic, destructive universe in which unimaginable cosmic forces determine the fate of entire galaxies.

In Paterson's work, the existential fear of cosmic disaster takes a manageable, solid form—that of a map. Paterson presents the incomprehensible in the guise of a solid, stable, knowable object. Because the object itself is non-threatening, it allows me to experience the thrill of fear as a kind of pleasure. This strategy is in also employed a second work, *100 Billion Suns*, which focuses on a particularly intense type of explosion—a Gamma

<sup>1</sup>The disaster referred to here is the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger on January 28, 1986. The crew included a schoolteacher, Christa McAuliffe, and the live broadcast of the launch was shown in many classrooms in the US.

ABB. 5. 47 UNTEN /  
ILL. P. 47 LOWER  
Katie Paterson, *All the Dead Stars*, 2009.  
Detail, Lasergätztes  
cloxiertes Aluminium /laser-etched  
anodized aluminum

**IN THESE IMAGES OF LIMITLESS, INCOMPREHENSIBLE PHENOMENA, WE ENCOUNTER THE CONDITIONS THAT SHAPE OUR OWN ROLES AS HUMAN OBSERVERS IN A RATIONALIZED, "HIGH-TECH" WORLD.**

Michael Connor

## WILD SKY: OBSERVING THE COSMOS IN A CYBERNETIC AGE



ABB. OBEN / ILL. UPPER  
Lisa Oppenheim,  
*Lunagrams*,  
1851/2010, Silber  
getöntes Fotogramm  
aus einer Serie von  
13/silver-toned photo-  
grams from a series of  
13, Installations-  
ansicht Edith-Ruß-  
Haus für Medien-  
kunst/installation  
view, Edith Russ Site  
for Media Art

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ABB. OBEN / ILL. UPPER  
Katie Paterson,  
*All the Dead Stars*,  
2009, Lasergeätztes  
eloxiertes Alumi-  
nium / laser-etched  
anodized aluminum,  
Installationsansicht /  
installation view,  
Bonniers Konstall,  
Stockholm, 2009 / 10

ABB. UNTEN / ILL. LOWER  
Cerith Wyn Evans,  
*With the Advent of  
Radio Astronomy...*  
(Grey), 2010, Wand-  
beschriftung / Wall  
vinyls, 48,8 x 150 cm

With the advent of Radio Astronomy in the early 1960's, techniques for the mapping of space made enormous technological advances. New findings were applied to existing data, and it was discovered that within maps charting vast swathes of the Southern Hemisphere, astral bodies—estimated to be millions of light years away—had been erroneously named and catalogued after microscopic inconsistencies within photographic emulsion. Solar systems identified from particles of dust, galaxies from dandruff.

Ray Burst—that sometimes takes place when a star dies. The piece consists of a confetti cannon containing 3,261 pieces of paper corresponding to every Gamma Ray Burst that has been observed. The cannon will be fired each day during the *Wild Sky* exhibition, releasing a cluster of these supernovae/confetti into the gallery space.

A real Gamma Ray Burst is a colossal event, equal in scale to the energy of 100 billion stars the size of our sun. If such an event took place in the Milky Way, it could result in mass extinction of life on earth. A single piece of colored confetti is a modest stand-in for a phenomenon of such magnitude—just as Paterson's map is an incomplete representation of the universe's supernovae. Yet this simplicity does not rob Paterson's work of its effect. It is through the simplicity of her systems of representation that one can sense the magnitude and destructiveness of the cosmos.

Where Paterson's work trades on a contrast between a knowable, concrete model and the vastness that it represents, Cerith Wyn Evans prefers to dwell on the instability inherent in representation. Wyn Evans's work *With the Advent*

*of Radio Astronomy... (Grey)* is a text piece that describes the shift from optical observation to radio telescope technology and its impact on the field of astronomy: "With the advent of Radio Astronomy in the early 1960's, techniques for the mapping of space made enormous technological advances. New findings were applied to existing data, and it was discovered that within maps charting vast swathes of the Southern Hemisphere, astral bodies—estimated to be millions of light years away—had been erroneously named and catalogued after microscopic inconsistencies within photographic emulsion. Solar systems identified from particles of dust, galaxies from dandruff."<sup>2</sup>

This is an account of technological progress, but it also implies that all human knowledge is contingent and fickle. If a technological advance such as the radio telescope can make an entire body of knowledge obsolete, one must wonder: which of our current assumptions about the universe will be disproven in the future?

Wyn Evans's work also calls attention to the relationship between image and language in our knowledge of the universe. Significantly, he describes the astronomers' er-

## A REAL GAMMA RAY BURST IS A COLOSSAL EVENT, EQUAL IN SCALE TO THE ENERGY OF 100 BILLION STARS THE SIZE OF OUR SUN.

rors in terms of language: the problem is as much in the naming and cataloguing as it is in the image itself. This echoes a concern with language seen in many of Evans's other works. His past installations have often included lights and window blinds that spell out messages in Morse code, a language of dubious value in a post-telegraph era.<sup>3</sup> Echoing the theme of language, *With the Advent of Radio Astronomy... (Grey)* highlights the instability of labels.

Paterson encountered this instability in quite practical terms while making *All the Dead Stars*. The definition of a dead star is not absolute, according to Paterson's frequent collaborator astrophysicist Ofer Lahav:

"The boundaries between life and death are a bit fuzzy here.... [T]he end of one object might be really the beginning of another object. And in fact, the stuff we are made of—the iron that is in our blood—is probably originated, was cooked, in a dying star."<sup>4</sup>

In Paterson's piece, to label a star as 'dead' or 'alive' is to

<sup>2</sup> This text is transcribed from a photograph of Wyn Evans's vinyl lettering, "Cerith Wyn Evans: With the advent of Radio Astronomy...." *White Cube* (website), [http://www.whitecube.com/viewers/image.php?f=grey\\_web.jpg&w=700&h=610&id=133&sec=editions&dir=f](http://www.whitecube.com/viewers/image.php?f=grey_web.jpg&w=700&h=610&id=133&sec=editions&dir=f) (accessed April 21, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will only Make Matters Worse) continued* 1968, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Ofer Lahav, *Tate-Shots: Katie Paterson: All the Dead Stars*, YouTube video, 4:16 min., uploaded by "tate," May 1, 2009, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LROh\\_oMCsZ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LROh_oMCsZ4) (accessed April 21, 2011).



