



Katie Paterson: The universe's official artist

By Gary Cansell | 06 April 2010



Shamil Tanna

"Next I want to make a doorbell that sounds like a dying star," says Katie Paterson. The 28-year-old artist has built a reputation for bringing science into her work. While studying for her master's at London's Slade School of Fine Art in 2007, she transposed Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* into Morse code, then bounced it off the Moon as a radio wave.

Fed into a self playing piano, the score returned in a fractured state -- she likes to think the missing notes are still adrift in space. Last December she set up an installation on Kent's Deal Pier in which street lamps flickered in time with lightning at places such as the North Pole.

Now, as the first artist in residence at University College London's Department of Physics & Astronomy, Paterson is creating a photo archive that shows the universe all along its 13.7-billion-year history. The images vary minutely -- the silver gelatine prints are embossed with handwritten coordinates and dates -- yet millennia separate them. "I like the idea of flattening this limitless, unknowable space into something as outdated as a family slide show," she says. The collection will be shown later this year at Seoul's PKM gallery.

She had previously (with the aid of Nasa and an army of back-garden supernova hunters) laser-etched a map of all 27,000 known dead stars. "There are many kinds," she explains, "and they die in different ways. My favourite is type 1b -- it explodes as brightly as a billion suns."

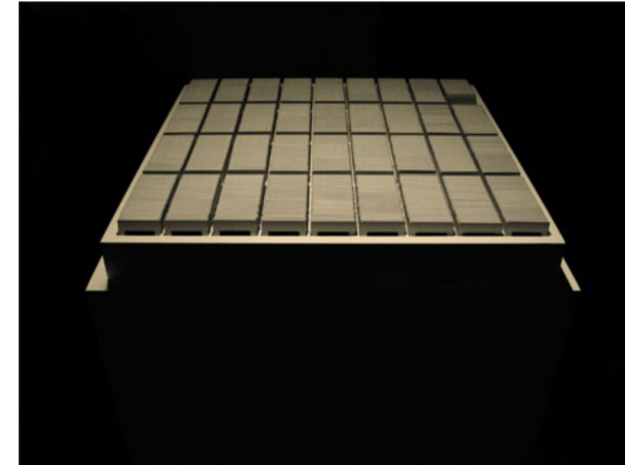
Interview with Katie Paterson

By Ceci Moss on Wednesday, June 16th, 2010 at 12:00 pm.



Katie Paterson in her studio (Photo credit: MJC © 2009)

*Katie Paterson is an artist whose work spans installation, sculpture, transmission, and sound. Her work presents the viewer with a deeper sense of the passage of time and the evolution of nature and the cosmos. Technology often factors into this line in her practice, where it is used to bring about an awareness of its own restrictions as well as our limited ability to sense and experience natural cycles and movement. She is currently showing *History of Darkness* in the group exhibition "Cage Mix" at BAL TIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, up until September 19, 2010. Her series "Every Night About This Time" also opens this weekend at the Whitstable Biennale.*



Katie Paterson, *History of Darkness*, 2010
(Ongoing slide archive, Installation view, BAL TIC Centre for Contemporary Art, 2010)
Photo credit: Katie Paterson © 2010

For Performa this past Fall, you transmitted darkness from 13.2 billion years ago for one minute on the television station MNN in *Ancient Darkness TV*. Now you're building an archive of images of ancient darkness in *History of Darkness*. I'm wondering if you can discuss this new project, and where it's taken you so far.

History of Darkness is an archive of darkness from throughout the universe, and it is showing in BAL TIC, UK. It's a slide archive and will eventually contain hundreds upon thousands of images of darkness from different times/places in the history of the universe, spanning billions of years. Each image (all entirely black or almost black) handwritten with its unique distance from earth in light years. It will be an open-ended and life-long project, added to and extended over time. There is never a way to represent, see or know all the darkness in the universe, so it's a kind of infinite journey, and a futile one, to try to capture it on a human scale, and make it an entity. The images are uprooted - they refer to places/times/spaces that could be anything and anywhere, with no definite beginning or end.



Katie Paterson, *History of Darkness*, 2010
 (Ongoing slide archive, Installation view, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, 2010)
 Photo credit: Katie Paterson © 2010

In your work, it seems you use newer technologies, such as television transmission or telephones (as in *Vatnajökull (the sound of)*), which often obscure distance and the elapse of time, in order to reverse this effect. By orchestrating encounters with, say, the sound of a prehistoric glacier or images that are 13.2 billion years old, it seems you bring the viewer into greater awareness of the expanse of both distance and time. Is this an attempt to recognize a deep time?

I find it astonishing that through telescopes, people can look directly into the universe to a time where the earth didn't even exist. That every time we look into the sky we are looking into the past (the light from the sun and the moon are reaching us from a few minutes ago) - in fact there is never a way to see what is going on around us in the universe right now this moment. I've recently returned from the WM Keck Observatory in Hawaii, where I was working with Caltech astronomers studying the 'Cosmic dawn', looking directly at galaxies 12 billion years back in time. With remarkable techniques astronomers are looking to almost 5% after the Big Bang. I was very fortunate to be able to actually witness this directly - such distant galaxies like tiny jewels on the screen. This is certainly a 'deep time,' an incomprehensible beyond, but it was right there in front of us on the screen. That really got me. How do we conceive of a time before the earth existed? And whilst these early pristine stars may seem remote from human experience, we are related in the most intimate way - every atom on Earth was synthesized by stars, they are what we've emerged from.



Katie Paterson, *Vatnajökull (the sound of)*, 2007/8
 (Hydrophone, mobile phone, DE500)
 Photo credit: Katie Paterson © 2007

You've worked with a number of scientists in the past, in order to do research and collect data for your projects. How do you initiate these conversations? Do you find that scientists are generally receptive to your ideas? What has this process been like?

I've been really fortunate to work with scientists who have been so receptive to my ideas. Sometimes I've been directed to a particular person, but most of the time I've sent an email out of the blue and hoped for the best. The relationships built up are as important to me as the work taking place - and much of the work comes about from many conversations. Conversations about everything from the quality of moonlight, figuring out how to harness lightning, send silence into space, and isotope a grain of sand. Lately, staying up til 6am with eminent astronomers at base station, bombarding them with strange questions...learning about lyman alpha lines, the early universe pictured as distant fog and candle light, expanding dusty space and the possible end of the universe.



Katie Paterson, *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull* 2007
 (3 digital films, 1h57m) Photo credit: Katie Paterson © 2007

Sound and music have had a prominent place in number of your works - from records made of ice (*Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull*) to the "Earth-Moon-Earth" series where you translate musical compositions, such as Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, into Morse code in order to transmit and reflect this information off the moon. Why do you think there is this attention to sound and music in your work? Do you think audio strikes a different register with your audience? How so?

Sound is a fragment amongst many materials that coexist together, like a wave being part of the sea. In "Earth-Moon-Earth" a playing piano can be heard, and the grainy sound of Morse code reflected to earth, together with a silent image of lost notes floating in space. At the same time, a glacier melting is listened to over a telephone. Often prominent is the unseen - withholding the visual can sometimes create stronger, more present imagery. Sound is also present in 'soundless pieces', my map of all the dead stars might bring to mind the sound of 27,000 stars exploding; silence beamed though space might invoke a whole array of sounds it collected on its journey. For Whitstable Biennale I'm creating a series of thirteen works, which appear and disappear throughout the festival, just as quarks and other phenomena in the universe appear visible at one moment and disappear the next. Some are happening in Whitstable, and others elsewhere, such as Alaska. I think the series has a musical sense to it - I see it as a fragmented orchestra, a constellation of works, an endless score. A record player will spin in synchronization with the earth's rotation, a black firework will be set off under dark skies, an atomic-sized grain of sand will be buried inside the Sahara desert. The imagination plays a key role in everything.