

Katie Paterson
In Another Time

For a short time on Exhibition Road last summer, amid the fanfare and hullabaloo of the Olympic Games' opening celebrations, appeared a rock. Measuring only about half a metre wide, this rock was neither as physically imposing as *Rock on Top of Another Rock*: Fischli and Weiss' two balancing boulders which have since appeared outside the Serpentine Gallery only a few minutes' walk away; nor was it as sleek and sinuous as Tony Cragg's sculptures, which currently punctuate that same thoroughfare. This rock was, in outward appearance at least, ordinary, crude, and without value.

Yet on learning its provenance, this rock takes on a different value for it was, and is, a reconfigured piece of meteorite. About four and a half billion years old and found buried in Argentina, twelve feet below the Earth's surface, it is a relic of cosmic history that was melted down and then recast as a version of itself before being deposited on Exhibition Road by the artist Katie Paterson. Named *Campo del Cielo (Field of the Sky)* after the place it was found, the meteorite's story - of its journey through time and space - still remains, but a human layer has been added via that story's encryption. Through Paterson's intervention the rock has come to embody the brevity of the human journey within that of the Universe. But it also represents the inextricably entwined characteristics of curiosity and imagination that drive artists, scientists and in fact all human beings to both explore and create; in doing so incrementally, subtly, yet irreversibly changing the very fabric of the universe they inhabit. This paradoxical rock - both a contemporary manmade object and primordial natural specimen - connected all those who encountered it (knowingly or otherwise) to a time before the Earth existed: a poignant counterpoint to the temporality of the London Olympic celebrations.

Katie Paterson's work appeared again in the Hayward Gallery's *Light Show* earlier this year. In contrast to the spectacle and theatre of so many of the works on show, *Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight* stood apart for its humility: a naked light bulb hanging by a cable from the ceiling and by which the small, otherwise empty room in which it was placed was suffused with a facsimile of moonlight.

Elsewhere in *Light Show* could be found work by Olafur Eliasson, the artist responsible for one of the Tate's most popular Unilever Series' commissions to date, *The Weather Project* of 2003. Ten years ago, Eliasson famously created a huge artificial sun that filled the Tate's Turbine Hall with the illusion of a sunset. Visitors were captivated by the illusion but Eliasson, mistrustful of the sublime, wanted them to be conscious of its mechanics too. Spectators were invited to walk beneath the sun to see the bank of yellow streetlights by which it was formed. And, in doing so, like pulling back the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*, art's ability to deceive was revealed.

There is no Wizard to be revealed in Katie Paterson's work. As evidenced by the title *Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight*, her work does not set out to captivate us with an illusion; instead it captivates with our own desire to complete the illusion. And whereas Eliasson's installation existed as a piece of site-specific immersive theatre, which visitors flocked to be a part of, intrinsic to Paterson's light work is the potential for any one of us to unscrew the bulb, take it away and recreate it in the privacy of our own homes. We respond to Paterson's light bulb, not communally, but individually. Like a piece of instrumental music, it appeals directly to our imaginations, revealing our abiding wonder at the universe and all its possibilities, whilst also making us acutely aware of the limitations of our own mortality.

For eventually, of course, the light bulb will burn out. And although the artist has provided 289 bulbs – enough, we are told, to provide us with a lifetime supply of moonlight - these too will eventually all burn out. Do only 289 bulbs truly represent a full human life? Divide this in two if you are middle aged; divide again for the hours of real moonlight you may yet see. As the meteorite positions human history within that of the universe, *Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight* provides a measure of our own lives in relation to that of the moon. And how short our lives would seem to be.

From her map of *All the Dead Stars*, which charts every star's death (27,000 in total) to have been recorded since human records began up until the work's making in 2009; to *Dying Star Doorbell*, a doorbell that emits the sound of a star's last gasp of life (just above middle C apparently) every time someone enters the room, a sense of mortality and of time's passing is intrinsic to all Paterson's work. Much of it incorporates already redundant or dated technologies – and what accelerates time more rapidly than technology? In *As the World Turns*, a turntable rotates in synchronicity with the Earth's rotation whilst playing a vinyl recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*; the mobile phone (probably our era's most emblematic yet disposable of technologies) by which Paterson provided a live phone line to Iceland's moving and melting *Vatnajökull* glacier in 2007 has long-since expired; even the baby grand piano that plays a version of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* that was bounced off the surface of the Moon via a form of radio transmission (*Earth-Moon-Earth*), is a record of a past event and a requiem for the notes that were lost in the Moon's crevasses and craters during the journey.

In the words of Henry Cotter, art critic for the New York Times: “*Art is all tied up in time. Time is its subject and its substance. Art records time, measures it, manipulates it, invents it. Art also exists in time, is composed of it, is swallowed up in it. The idea of timeless art is sweet. But there is no ‘timeless.’ And the longer a piece of art outlives its time, the more clearly it speaks of ephemerality, what is or will be gone.*”¹

So what does Katie Paterson's work say of what is: of the here and now?

The brief blaze of the 2012 Olympics may have provided a welcome relief from the otherwise unrelenting rhetoric around spending cuts and an atmosphere darkened by widespread job losses, rising poverty and global debt crises but its boost to both to the economy and public morale was short lived. The London Olympics reminded us of more affluent times, but was a reminder too that the affluence of those times was – like Eliasson's sublime sunset – illusory.

By making the connection between the history of mankind and that of the cosmos; between a human life and that of a star; Paterson's work provides a long view of humanity's place in the cosmos that makes the boom years of an economy, the history of humanity, even the so called eternal flame of the Olympic torch seem fleeting. This is most evident in her ongoing series, *The Dying Star Letters* and *The History of Darkness*. For the former series, Paterson writes a letter of condolence every time she is notified of a star's death; for the latter, she creates a slide transparency of every new photographic image she discovers of the farthest reaches of space – each slide-mount handwritten with the image's distance from Earth in light years, and arranged from one to infinity. Each series is finite as determined by the artist's own lifespan. However, as scientists probe deeper into space, they also see further back in time. Were the archives to continue after the artist's death, they would bear witness to scientific advancements she will never know, recording events that took place long before her birth.

¹ Holland Cotter: *Hurry Up, Art is Long and Time is Fleeting*, New York Times, 6 Jan 2006.

Katie Paterson's work demonstrates the brevity of an individual life; of all human life; indeed of this planet's life in relation to that of the cosmos; it is in no way however about the futility of existence: far from it. Intrinsic to all Paterson's work – often developed in collaboration with scientists – is a celebration of the best of humanity: the power of the imagination. It is imagination that drives people to walk on the moon; to explore the farthest reaches of space; to attempt to capture the beauty and mystery of moonlight – be that in the form of a light bulb, in music or in paint.

Take Katie Paterson's most recent project, *Second Moon*, for which a piece of the moon, a tiny relic of space displaced from its original home to be bought and sold as a commodity by meteorite dealers is, temporarily at least, sent back into space to orbit the Earth. Relayed from airplane to airplane, the rock circumnavigates the globe, only touching the ground long enough to be transferred to the next flight and the next step of its journey without destination. This journey is tracked through the use of the space-based satellite navigation system, GPS. The technologies that enable both the rock's voyage and the ability to track it derive from the human imaginings of what it must be like firstly to fly and secondly to fly into space.

It has frequently been said that humanity went to space to discover the Moon but returned having discovered Earth. The image of the Blue Marble in the Apollo spacecraft's rear view mirror captured the imagination of people across the globe, engendering a realisation both of the beauty and fragility of the world they inhabited and stimulating the emergence of environmental movements worldwide. Katie Paterson's work provides that rear view perspective as science continues to discover new territories. It connects us to a time before the Earth existed and to a time when it will be no more. It rekindles our sense of awe at the universe we inhabit and teases our imaginations with that which has yet to be discovered. It reveals a universe of great beauty and infinite possibilities. Her work shows that humanity – all too commonly depicted as wreaking destruction upon the planet - can also be a positive, creative force. Katie Paterson's work reminds us of the value of looking to the stars and gives us hope that the future may not be such a bleak place after all.

Fiona Venables, 2013