

## Katie Paterson, Sand and Stars

‘People often say that I’m curious about too many things at once: botany, astronomy, comparative anatomy. But can you really forbid a man from harbouring a desire to know and embrace everything that surrounds him?’ Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859)

### I

Katie Paterson is a seeker and a speculator. She asks questions, endlessly curious. Her work harnesses poetic thinking to advanced scientific enquiry to create beautiful, elegant and profound works of art. Paterson’s voice and sensibility are completely original and utterly contemporary – it is difficult to imagine a work such as *100 Billion Suns* (2012) being made at any other moment than the present – yet her work is indebted to, or rather informed by, two important moments from the history of art. Firstly the Sublime, a notion first fully articulated in the mid-eighteenth century, which Paterson both subverts - using humour and absurdity - and exploits, creating a vertiginous sense of human relativity. The second is Conceptual art, a movement initiated in the 1960s in which the idea is the artwork, conceptual content taking primacy over material manifestation. Specifically, Paterson’s work forges connections with certain aspects of Land art, a form of Conceptual art that engaged with earth and landscape. This text explores the relationship of Paterson’s work to these two important precursors.

### II

‘The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.’<sup>i</sup>

There has been much discussion, in relation to Paterson’s work, of her finely tuned sense of the absurd and her lightness of touch. One might even say that a kind of humour runs through much of her work. But in considering the group of works gathered together for the exhibition at Springhornhof, I want to stress a different aspect of her work, its grand and melancholy themes and its recurrent engagement with awe. Paterson’s work returns again and again to darkness. It reveals an obsession with destruction, with the apocalyptic and the inevitable dissolution of the universe and all things therein. Witness her fascination with the death throes of stars (in *All The Dead Stars*, *Dying Star Doorbell*, the *Dying Star Letters* and *100 Billion Suns*, amongst other works). In such works impossibly vast cosmic events are rendered at a domestic scale. The modesty of their presentation, if anything, only serves to enhance the sense of their magnitude. This is work about, in Lauren Reid’s memorable recent phrasing, ‘building a psychic bridge between our own knowable experience and an incomprehensible one.’<sup>ii</sup>

This is also the Sublime, in its classical form. It is about notions of scale and time that are so vast, so beyond our everyday experience, as to induce a *frisson* of terror. Such works ask us to contemplate an inevitable negation of ourselves and everything we know. Our insignificance is a determining factor in the work’s impact. They point us towards a state of nothingness towards which all things seem to be rushing headlong. When Edmund Burke proposed a definition of the sublime in 1754, ideas of fear and jeopardy were central:

‘And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater... Indeed terror is in all cases

whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime...'

Yet contained within Paterson's insistence on destruction and dissolution is the possibility of transformation. From the impossibly vast cataclysms of star death and supernova new forms are born. Matter returns. There is an equivalence with Paterson's methods. In her work *Campo del Cielo, Field of the Sky* (2012), a meteorite is destroyed by fire and then reconstituted as a version of itself. It looks the same as it was, but is not. Its matter fills the same form but the atoms and molecules that give it substance are rearranged. It is a new thing.

*100 Billion Suns* – a work that posits a confetti cannon explosion as an equivalent for the most powerful gamma ray bursts ever recorded by man – is an exercise in undermining the grandiosity of the sublime. It is both a work of cosmic awe and a piece of ridiculous slapstick, a replay of the classic gag where the gun goes 'bang'.

### III

'A crack in the wall, if viewed in terms of scale, not size, could be called the Grand Canyon. A room could be made to take on the immensity of the solar system.'<sup>iii</sup>

One of the most important ways in which Land and Conceptual art revolutionized the language of art and the possibilities of an 'expanded field of sculpture' in the 1960s and 70s, was in terms of scale. The twentieth century saw a steady progression from the domestic to the monumental to the quasi-architectural, from Tatlin's unrealized *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20) to Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1938) and Claes Oldenburg's giant *Clothespin* (1976) in Philadelphia, but these works were all – despite their enlarged scale – sculptures in the traditional sense: singular constructed objects. Land art took notions of scale into a completely different register. In the 1960s, American artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer began to question the notion of the singular object and instead focus on experiential models, prioritizing the individual's phenomenological experience of place and site, and – of course – scale. James Turrell, Nancy Holt and Charles Ross created large-scale structures to allow the viewer or participant to engage with remote astrological phenomena, sunlight and moonlight, the solstices, and the motion of the earth in space in relation to other astral bodies such as the moon and the pole star.

In Europe, artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton made works that had no permanent physical form other than the texts and photographs that documented them. In 1968 Long made *A Ten Mile Walk on Exmoor*, marking an actual passage through space and place and time on foot with just a modest line on a map and a succinct text, yet thereby inscribing a conceptual structure ten miles in length.

Despite her modest materials – confetti cannons, record players, clocks, lightbulbs and letters – Paterson's range of reference is vast. Her work echoes the rigorous conceptual structuring of Long and Fulton, but also the expanded experiential sense of the Americans. While she is yet to build any large and permanent structures she has just planted a forest in Norway, as part of a massively ambitious 100-year artwork, *Future Library* (2014 - 2114). She has also conceptualised and proposed a series of seemingly impossible constructions such as *An ice rink / of frozen water / from every glacier* (2014) and *A beach / made with sand / from hourglasses* (2014). These are 'ideas' only and not intended to be built, but to exist only as imaginary structures, conceptual constructions. Scale need not be physical, it can exist in the mind.

This combination of real and conceptual experience is strongly indebted to Land art. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1972) does exist, but is so remote as to be an

essentially conceptual artwork for most. Long really did walk those miles across the moor but it is a common response to the work to question whether the action was ever actually carried out. Such works invoke Smithson's seminal notion of *Site* and *Nonsite* and again, this idea resonates with much of Paterson's practice. For Smithson the idea of *Site* and *Nonsite* (a relationship equivalent to the linguistic formulation of signifier and signified), articulated a division in the structuring of the work. The *Site* is the original and unique place in the landscape, while the *Nonsite* is the artist's presentation of a form of analogue or equivalent, often comprising actual geological material, maps, mirrors and texts, in the gallery space.

One of Paterson's characteristic modes is to establish connections across vast distances – a phone number in London connected to a glacier in Iceland in *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* (2011), or a radio signal 'bounced' off the surface of the moon for *Earth – Moon – Earth* (2007). The work is here but ultimately refers to something that is elsewhere; another place and a past moment in time. Site and nonsite.

But while Paterson is often characterised as an artist of the stars and the cosmos, she also shares with the Land artists a fascination with the earth bound stuff of the landscape, with geology and natural phenomena. Glaciation, growth, fossilization, electricity and weather systems provide inspiration for works. Sand, in particular, seems to recur in her work, serving perhaps as a cypher for time and infinitude.

#### IV

Ideas of the sublime and extreme shifts of scale are key elements in Paterson's methodology. They are not new ideas, but she uses them in new ways. They are strategies for making us look again, look again and again, for making us look differently, think and see differently. Expanding perception, recasting understanding. Paterson's work, like that of Smithson, Holt, Turrell, Long and others, reminds us that we are part and parcel of the flux and flow of time and life. We live our brief lives on a small lump of rock swinging through the infinite darkness and emptiness of the universe. It is a terrible reality. Yet, somehow, perversely, also comforting.

Like Alexander von Humboldt Paterson has taught herself about astronomy and botany, as well as chronometry, metals, light, fossils and forestry. Yet what is so striking about Paterson's work is that knowledge is not positioned as an end. It is a means. The work does not provide answers to the questions she asks, but somehow occupies a space in between the question and the answer. This is, perhaps, the space of poetry.

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<sup>i</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757

<sup>ii</sup> Lauren Reid, 'Scaling the Sublime' in *A Planetary Order*, exh cat, Galerie Christian Ehrentraut, Berlin, 2014, p.8

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty' (1972) in Jack Flam ed. *Robert Smithson: The Collection Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p.147