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Katie Paterson: Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)

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**Katie Paterson's lunar meditation on music, technology
and imperfection reassesses our place in the cosmos and
how far art can extend our view**

by DARRAN ANDERSON

Complimented by her exceptional microcosmic *Ideas* exhibition at the Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh, Katie Paterson's *Earth-Moon-Earth*, which runs as part of the Edinburgh art festival, explores and recalibrates our abiding romantic and artistic attachments to the moon through modern technology. For a cold lifeless sphere of rock and dust locked in orbit around our planet, the satellite has had many protean identities. It has been a symbol of love and chastity, lucidity and madness, eternity and death. It never changes and it never stops changing. Poets have serenaded its femininity and its solitude and have, in the case of the Chinese poet Li Bai, drowned attempting to embrace its reflection. To the grand-cynic Philip Larkin, it was a "lozenge of love" and a "medallion of art"; its celestial light aiding his stumbling path from the toilet. Above all, it is clear that the moon has and always will be, as long as there are people to observe it, a canvas.

Paterson, rather than deconstructing our affinities to suit a more cynical materialist age, very deftly and subtly reframes them and, in doing so, enhances the romantic by forcing us to reflect on what it actually is and why. Myths have purposes even, or rather especially, in a world that ostensibly shuns them. The daylight hours may have been colonised by work and commerce, but the night remains a quite different territory.

Using a technique known as "moon bounce", Paterson has sent Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, in the form of Morse code, from the Earth to the moon's surface. This was then reflected off the moon and received back on Earth. While the application of such technology was originally for military and astronomical purposes, there was nevertheless an inherently poetic idea at the heart of it, one enhanced when it became possible for amateur radio operators to perform it. What makes Paterson's project a resounding quiet success is the way she embraces the imperfections of the technique, opening up the process from a parlour trick to a meditation on art, inspiration and where we are in the cosmos.

During the process of traversing space and connecting with another world, the radio transmission containing Moonlight Sonata is invariably distorted. It is subject to path loss, more mysteriously described in Paterson's notes: "The moon reflects only part of the information back – some is absorbed in its shadows, 'lost' in its craters." It stays there and what returns is changed. An engineer might look at this as a technical problem to be rectified; the artist takes a different view. Paterson has incorporated the breaks and deformations into a reconfigured Moonlight Sonata, which is then performed by a self-playing grand piano. This is an enchanting combination of technology and enigma; a ghost in the machine, so to speak. Yet its appeal would be limited to atmosphere and aesthetics were it not for the aspect of chance that pervades the piece.

It is no great revelation to point out that perfection is overrated, but there are possibilities in embracing imperfection. The mysteries of chance and automatism have enthralled artists for centuries but it takes a focused mind to use them to their advantage rather than being at the mercy of randomness. For every success, there are a hundred noble failures. Though completely different as an artwork, the process of creating Paterson's *Earth-Moon-Earth* calls to mind Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23). Duchamp had been dissatisfied with the finished piece until its glass panels were cracked in transit to a gallery. Admiring the spider-web of fractures, he is said to have remarked something to the effect of: "Now it is complete." Here, too, in Paterson's

installation, there is a sense of a work being deepened by being in the hands of outside forces. It must be added that chaos would remain chaos if not guided by the talent and perception of the artist. Imperfection takes skill, and Paterson is an exceptional artist who, through leaps of the imagination, encourages us to reconsider our place in space and time. This has taken her from telephoning the creaking heart of an Icelandic glacier to mapping the dead but still shining stars of deep space to carving a single grain of sand in the midst of the Sahara desert. Were it not an unnecessarily limiting term, Paterson appears a modern Romantic in an age of postmodern cleverness and cowardice. She restores the poetic and the magic through technology and an acute awareness of where we are located and the views it affords us of the universe. Most importantly, she brings us along with her.

What then does *Earth-Moon-Earth* tell us or, more fittingly, what questions does it raise in the viewer's mind? First, there is the issue of how rational artistic inspiration might be. Is it something to be plucked from the ether or something carefully and diligently constructed? Can Beethoven be reduced to the binary mechanics of Morse code without losing some of its magic? On the other hand, might it gain some poetic otherness when taken out of human control? What is lost may be our initial concern, what is gained might be a more interesting consideration.

When the reconstructed Moonlight Sonata plays, we realise how deeply we know this music, how intricately it is woven into our collective consciousness by how much each gap and mis-note jars. And yet, we might consider, as Paterson's work suggests, how little we actually know this piano sonata. We know only scraps of its conception and inspiration, even Beethoven aficionados could only point to vague notes on a theme of fantasy. Indeed, it was not known as Moonlight Sonata to its composer (its operative name was the much less evocative Piano Sonata No 14); the title being added by the 19th-century critic Ludwig Rellstab, who thought its sound conjured up images of moonlight glistening on the surface of Lake Lucerne. Given that we remember it largely because of this inaccurate label, we might ask ourselves what is accuracy and is it desirable, even if it were possible? The imperfections and inaccuracies are the things that attract us. To some, it is a nocturne, to others it is more a funeral dirge. To the crudely rational, it is just a collection of notes in a certain order, much as the moon is just an illuminated rock in space, but we know they are much more. The music is there for us to project our fantasies on to, just as the moon is.

The message is flawed then, but without flaws and loss, beauty is sterile, just as romance without an element of deconstruction is illusion. The moon is a canvas. So too is art. There are worlds in those echoes, Paterson convinces us, just as there are dialogues in what we mistake for monologues. The Earth is rediscovered by the projected message. The moon, if we listen carefully, answers back.