

Touching the Universe: The Expansion of Celestial Portraits in Contemporary Art or the Day Sirius Fell from the Sky

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Abstract. There is an interesting parallel between astronomy's growth in technical abilities to reach further and further into the depths of the expanding universe and art's ambitions in creating expansive images of the same. The Webb and Euclid space telescopes are providing us with images not even the Hubble could have imagined. Artists, for their part, are no longer content to simply produce images of the Sun, for example, they are finding ways to recreate it. Science's technological explosion is paralleled by an equally ambitious technological arms race in the arts. There is a paradox to this in that the further we reach out, the more inaccessible the universe becomes, and it loses something of its reality, let alone for most of us the night sky has become unviewable and cluttered with artificial bodies launched to 'improve' our lives. This paper looks at contemporary art's attempts at recreating the universe, focusing mostly on large scale installations like Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003), Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Solar Equation* (2010), Angela Bulloch's *Night Sky* (Mercury and Venus) (2010) and Katie Paterson's *Totality* (2016). Each of these works reveal contemporary art's attempts to convey the growing changes in technology, our evolving understanding of the universe, and how this reflects back on ourselves.

Introduction

The twentieth century saw humanity expand its horizons like never before. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, a period dubbed the second industrial revolution, we witnessed unprecedented technological growth that included the harnessing of electricity, the invention of the automobile, the airplane, wireless communication, and so on, that eventually saw us land on the Moon. And it continued to grow exponentially whereby the end of the twentieth century we were on the cusp of a communications revolution heralded by the internet. Science fuelled these changes as it underwent its own

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revolution with Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, and Information Theory.¹ In a span of a hundred years, astronomy went from the idea that the Milky Way was the whole of our universe to the awareness that it was one of many galaxies to discovering a plethora of planets in our galaxy.² The arts also evolved with the invention of photography, moving pictures, and television. Today, a variety of digital media fuels the imagination of artists. Artists also began to think big. The fine arts saw the rebirth of earthworks, massive earth moving projects punctuated by Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and James Turrell's *Roden Crater Project* (1974-).³ The Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson even went so far as to challenge the sunset over Utrecht with his *Double Sunset* (1999) by the end of the century.

The Futurists

There is obviously a risk with these achievements of rekindling an arrogance in our abilities, one the Romantic artist J.M.W. Turner sought to warn his contemporaries against on the heels of the Industrial Revolution. It is an arrogance that reared its ugly head some hundred years later with a group of artists known as the Italian Futurists, whose initial manifesto of 1909 sang the praises of new inventions such as the automobile, describing the first recorded joy ride that ended in a ditch after the driver had to avoid hitting a cyclist. The Futurist Giacomo Balla's painting *Street Light* (Fig. 1) dated the same year as the manifesto, although likely painted a year or two later, has an electric streetlight beaming, competing with that of the Moon. This echoes the poet and leader of the Futurists, F.T. Marinetti who complains about the Moon in his text 'Let's Murder the Moonshine', also from 1909. He describes the following scene in his account of the building of a railroad line in India:

¹ For an excellent survey of this period in the history of science see Jon Agar, *Science in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

² Alain Omont, *On the Edge of the Cosmos: A Century of Revolution in Astronomy* (Les Ulis, France: EDP Sciences, 2022) traces some of the important developments in astronomy of the past 100 years.

³ John G. Hatch, 'Modern Earthworks and Their Cosmic Embrace', in Enrico Maria Corsini, ed., *The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena VI: Astronomical Society of the Pacific Conference Series, Vol. 441* (San Francisco, CA: Astronomical Society of the Pacific, 2011), pp.225–33; see also, Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis (eds.), *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1998).

...while we, all of us, were raging to free our arms and legs from the last clinging lianas, suddenly we felt the carnal Moon, the Moon of lovely warm thighs, abandoning herself languidly against our broken backs.

A cry went up in the airy solitude of the high plains: "Let's murder the Moonshine!"

Some ran to nearby cascades; gigantic wheels were raised, and turbines transformed the rushing waters into magnetic pulses that rushed up wires, up high poles, up to shining, humming globes.

So it was that three hundred electric Moons canceled with their rays of blinding mineral whiteness the ancient green queen of loves.⁴

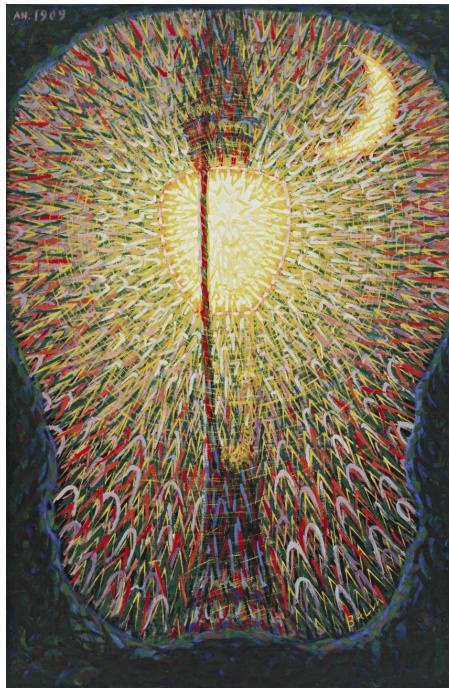


Fig. 1. Giacomo Balla, *Street Light*, dated 1909 (probably c. 1910–11), oil on canvas, 174.7 x 114.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁴ F.T. Marinetti, *Let's Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings* (Los Angeles, CA: Sun & Moon Classics, 1991), p.59.

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The Futurist writings are replete with references to astronomy, and science generally. In terms of the night sky, these are frequently not very flattering. For example:

We lay down to sleep, each of us wrapped in the limitless madness of the Milky Way, in the shadow of the Palace of the living, and immediately the uproar of the great square hammers of space and time fell silent. ... But Paolo Buzzi couldn't sleep; his exhausted body continually started up, pricked by the poisonous stars that assailed us from every quarter.

Madmen and madwomen poured out by the thousands from the open doors, in torrents, shirtless, half-naked, to rejuvenate and recolor the Earth's wrinkled face.

Immediately some of them wanted to brandish the shining bell towers like ivory batons; others began to sit in a circle and toss the domes around like balls.... The women were combing their distant cloud-tresses with the sharp points of a constellation.⁵

On the other hand, the painter Balla depicted the transit of Mercury in a number of works in 1914 and the Futurists were giddy about the prospects the new technologies would bring, as Marinetti wrote sometime between 1911 and 1915:⁶

Oh! how I envy the men who will be born into the next century on my beautiful peninsula when it is wholly vivified, shaken, and bridled by the new electric forces!

A haunting vision of the future carries my soul away in delicious gusts....⁷

⁵ Marinetti, *Let's Murder the Moonshine*, p.55–56.

⁶ Gary Wells, 'Balla's *Mercury Passing Before the Sun* and the Modernist Sun', in Nicholas Campion and Chris Impey, eds, *Imagining Other Worlds: Explorations in Astronomy and Culture, Studies in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology, Vol. 9* (Ceredigion, Wales: the Sophia Centre Press in partnership with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2018).

⁷ Marinetti, *Let's Murder the Moonshine*, p.112.

The Futurists would have certainly envied the Australian director Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* produced almost a century later in 1998 for the scope of its world building ambitions.

The Dome of Heaven Hollywood Style

Weir's film recounts the story of Truman Burbank, played by the Canadian comedian and actor Jim Carrey. Truman was born an unwanted child. He's adopted by a corporation that at the time we join the story has raised him for thirty years on the beautiful island of Seahaven. Unbeknownst to Truman, Seahaven and the surrounding waters are a massive television production studio (likely located in Burbank, California) and populated entirely by actors, with over 5000 cameras recording Truman's life 24/7, making him a reality TV star. All of it is managed and controlled by the executive producer Christof played by American actor Ed Harris, who not only controls the actors in Seahaven but the weather as well, operating from a production booth stationed in the false Moon. It is clear as the film progresses that Christof suffers from a god complex. In the penultimate moment at the end of the film, Christof speaks to Truman as a disembodied voice from the sky, introducing himself as the Creator, then with a very short but significant pause, continues 'of a reality show with you, Truman, as its star'.⁸

Obviously, there are some devices needed to keep Truman on the island, one of which is to have his actor father die by drowning in a storm thus leading to Truman's intense fear of water. Other devices include a constant reminder of how great life is in one's own community and prompts of the dangers of travel. While visiting a travel agency, Truman sits at a travel agent's desk and notices a poster with a plane being struck by lightning and the caption at the top reading 'This could happen to you!' This is preceded by another poster we see as the camera pans the agent's office warning travellers of disease, terrorists, wild animals and street gangs. In a flashback, we find a young Truman relating to his teacher that he wants to be an explorer, to which his teacher responds, as she pulls down a map of the world: 'You're too late, there's really nothing left to explore'.

Being a television show, there is an abundance of product placements, most notably by Truman's wife Meryl played by the American actor Laura Linney. At one point, as she and Truman are having a heated argument, Meryl offers Truman some Mococoa drink, presenting it in the fashion of

⁸ For an excellent summary and analysis of *The Truman Show* see Simone Knox, 'Reading *The Truman Show* Inside Out', *Film Criticism* 35, no. 1 (Fall 2010): pp.1-23.

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1950s television advertisement, and describing it in some detail; he looks at her and asks angrily who she's talking to and what is she talking about.



Fig. 2. Still from *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey, 1998, © Paramount/courtesy Everett Collection.



Fig. 3. Still from *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey, 1998, © Paramount/courtesy Everett Collection.

Weir's film is amazingly prescient of the imminent explosion of reality television. But our interest in this film is partly because it is the largest installation imagined, which recreates the night sky with some incongruities which are not questioned by Truman as Seahaven has been his natural environment since birth. Astronomy plays a key role in the denouement of the plot. Near the beginning of the film, Truman walks out to another perfect day, suddenly a Klieg light, stage light, falls from the sky on the street near him. The light is labelled Sirius part of Canis Major, signalling its role in the night sky of the production studio (Fig. 2). This astronomical moment of a fallen star, a stellar anomaly, has Truman starting to question things — announcing the coming end of Truman's stardom as an unwitting reality TV star. As a result, he begins noticing the inconsistencies he had overlooked all his life. There is panic amongst the show's producers as Truman starts discovering more and more anomalies, his reality begins to unravel. It results in a moment of frenzy, with Truman out of control. He's finally convinced by his 'family' and 'friends' that he has had something of a nervous breakdown.

The film opens with Truman in front of his bathroom mirror fantasizing about being a mountain climber. Sometime after Truman's 'nervous breakdown', things appear to have returned to normal. He's back in front of the bathroom mirror, now fantasizing about being an astronaut, a Trumanian of the Galaxy Burbank (Fig. 3). His dreams and fantasies are now interstellar, in a direct contrast to how small his world actually is. This scene is a prelude to the final unravelling of the whole of Truman's reality. In the end, Truman uncovers the truth, overcomes his fear of water, and finds his way out of the Seahaven set.

There is one last connection to astronomy, namely the possible influence of the famous Camille Flammarion print from his 1888 book (Fig. 4).⁹ A connection drawn by fans and commentators on the film, although I have yet to read anything indicating that the director Weir was actually inspired by this print.¹⁰

⁹ Camille Flammarion's *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire* (Paris: Hachette, 1888), p.163.

¹⁰ For example, <https://nwhyte.livejournal.com/3747940.html> [accessed 28 December 2024]; see also Natalie Lettenewitsch, 'Breaking through – Staying Inside: Imagining the End of the World as a Place', in Sheila C. Bibb and Alexandra Simon-López, eds, *Framing the Apocalypse: Visions of the End-of-Times* (Brill, 2015), p.126.

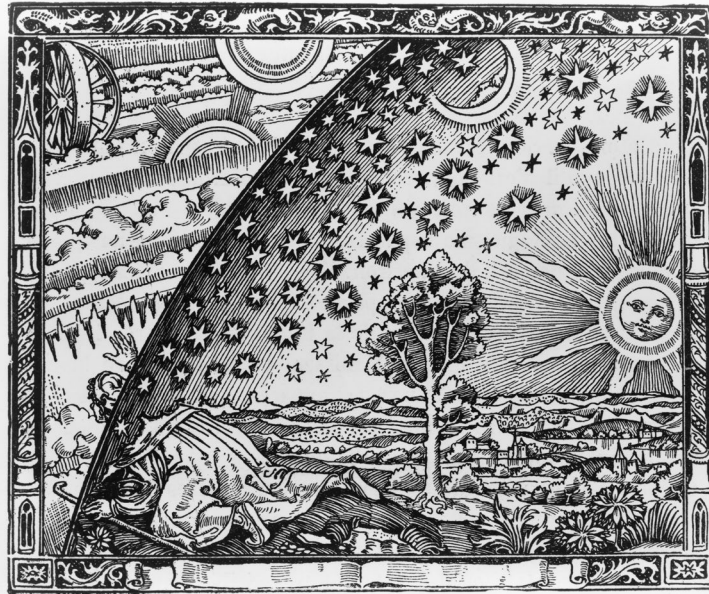


Fig. 4. 'A traveller peers through an opening in the firmament'. Illustration from Camille Flammarion's *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire* (Paris: Hachette, 1888), p.163.

The Sun

Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson could not compete with a Hollywood film. But he did manage to produce something exceptional in scale. In 2003, in the massive central Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern art gallery in London, Eliasson installed a semi-circular disk on which were placed mono-frequency lamps that generated an intense yellow light. He mirrored the ceiling to generate the illusion of a 50-metre diameter circle, replicating the Sun. Humidifiers placed throughout the space created a mist and by the end of most days there appeared very thin cloud formations. Whether intentional or not, a festive atmosphere was produced, with urban Sun worshippers lying on the floor of the hall, viewing their reflections on the ceiling, taking in an ironic experience that they could enjoy directly by simply stepping outside. Perhaps it is fitting that for a generation of city dwellers who function indoors and underground for most of their lives and communicate electronically, a synthetic experience of nature had to be

created for them to truly appreciate it, let alone sharing the experience with others in a more direct, physical way.¹¹

In 2010, a 14-metre diameter balloon filled with helium and securely tethered showed up at a winter festival in Melbourne Australia. It was at the time the largest spherical balloon in the world and custom made for the Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.



Fig. 5. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Solar Equation*, *Relational Architecture 16*, 2010. Federation Square, The Light in Winter Festival, Melbourne, Australia. Photo: Marcel Aucar. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution -Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Spain License.

Using five projectors controlled by 7 computers programmed by custom-made software, the balloon was animated with NASA data from the SOHO and SDO solar observatory imaging and overlaid with live animations derived from Navier-Stokes equations, reaction diffusion, Perlin noise, particle systems and fractal flame equations. These combined to reproduce the Sun exactly 100 million times smaller than the original. Titled *Solar Equation*, the work simulated the flares, sunspots, and turbulences on the surface of the Sun, patterns that never repeated themselves. The fact that

¹¹ Hatch, 'Modern Earthworks and Their Cosmic Embrace,' p.233. The catalogue for *The Weather Project* remains the best source on the work in question; see Susan May, ed., *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).

this animation was projected on a helium balloon was a nice touch as the Sun's energy is a product of the conversion of hydrogen to helium. A fun feature of the piece was an iPhone app that anyone could use, affecting the surface of the sphere with the touch of a finger on the app's screen. There was an iPad version of the app as well. It was a beautiful animation and quite sophisticated, but as massive as it was viewed from the festival ground, aerial shots of the installation diminished its impressiveness, highlighting how perspective influences one's viewing of celestial objects.¹²

The work was reinstalled a few times, notably in 2015 in the Lutheran church of Ulm Minster in Germany. Churches will be a popular site for many of the large-scale installation works inspired by astronomy this century, some of which are discussed below, and there are obviously good reasons for this. The most notable is the fact that many church ceilings during the Medieval and Early Renaissance periods in Europe saw their ceilings decorated with stars and other celestial objects, most famously at the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi (1227–1253), Sainte-Chapelle (1242–1248, Paris), and the Scrovegni Chapel (1303–1305, Padua).

In 2018, Lozano-Hemmer took a slightly different approach in reproducing the Sun, this time in a piece called *Volumetric Solar Equation* displayed at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in Canada. It was a smaller and more self-sustaining solar model, measuring 3 metres in diameter and composed of 25,580 LED lights set in 342 battens made of aluminium and wood. The whole was connected to a computer running solar turbulence equations. It offered one the opportunity to 'play' the 11-year solar cycle. It seems fitting that this representation of the Sun in the manner and location it was displayed had the appearance of a chandelier as chandeliers have been interpreted at times as symbols of the Sun given their central role in illuminating rooms.¹³

The Moon

A 3-metre in diameter helium filled balloon illuminated from the inside by English artist Simon Faithfull duped an audience at the Big Chill music festival in 2008 into believing that the Moon had risen again and was moving across the horizon. This *Fake Moon* performance would happen again in 2010 and 2013. It was an interesting idea but the pulleys and cart

¹² *Solar Equation* is described in full and beautifully documented on Lozano-Hemmer's website at https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/solar_equation.php.

¹³ See https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/volumetric_solar_equation.php.

that had the Moon traverse an arc across the sky, mimicking the movement of the actual Moon, was a primitive mechanism resulting in the fake Moon bobbing and weaving with each pull of the cart.¹⁴

Mimicking a celestial body requires a level of technical sophistication. Such is the case with the English artist Luke Jerram's *Museum of the Moon*, which was created and first exhibited in 2016.



Fig. 6. Luke Jerram's *Museum of the Moon* at London Natural History Museum in August 2019. Photo: cmglee. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

It was inspired by the wide tidal variations in Jerram's native Bristol. It is a 7-metre diameter helium balloon made of ripstop material and coated with urethane. Printed on its surface is NASA imagery of the Moon's surface at 120 dpi. It is a 1:500000 scale model of the actual Moon with each centimetre representing 5 kilometres of the Moon's surface.¹⁵ It is lit internally, except in those cases where it has been displayed in daylight. In

¹⁴ Faithfull's *Fake Moon* is documented on the artist's website at <https://archive.simonfaithfull.org/works/fake-Moon/>.

¹⁵ Elena Bozhkova, 'Lunar Balloonist: Interview with Luke Jerram', nature.com blogs (21 July 2016), <https://blogs.nature.com/aviewfromthebridge/2016/07/21/lunar-balloonist/> [accessed 29 December 2024]; and, Luke Jerram, 'Museum of the Moon', my-Moon.org [accessed 29 December 2024].

fact, Jerram's Moon has travelled a lot, and he has multiple versions currently on tour. For example, it was installed wittily but appropriately at interior swimming facilities in Rennes, France (2017) and Milan, Italy, (2019) – thankfully, there were no complaints by swimmers of issues with tidal pulls. In 2018, *The Museum of the Moon* was shown in Kolkata, India. It also turned up at the Glastonbury music festival in 2019. Like Lozano-Hemmer, Jerram presented his sphere inside churches as well, most notably at Ely Cathedral in 2019. More recently, in 2023, the Moon appeared in a camp on the West Bank, Palestine.¹⁶

There are many reasons for Jerram to exhibit the Moon at the scale that he does. It brings our most familiar nighttime celestial object into greater focus. People have commented that seeing it in this manner made them better understand how big the actual Moon is and how varied its surface is. Why it's called the *Museum of the Moon* is because, to paraphrase Jerram, the Moon is a cultural mirror, on which much of human history has been inscribed, acting not only as a record of our past and present, but also as a timekeeper, a calendar, and a navigational tool. Our interpretation of it varies based on location, whether because of its setting or the country it is displayed in.¹⁷

In 2018 Jerram produced a sequel of sorts based on the Earth, which he titled *Gaia*, the name of the Greek mythological personification of our planet. It has turned out to be almost as popular as *Museum of the Moon*. Like it, *Gaia* is also 7 metres in diameter and produced in the same manner using NASA imagery. Unlike the Moon, it offers an opportunity to its audiences to experience the Earth as a celestial orb and to share something of what astronauts describe when seeing the Earth from space. When shown in the United States, for example, *Gaia* prompted visitors to ponder issues such as global conflicts and climate change, with one person noting: 'It makes me realize how small I am. I'm worried about the way it is going to change over time'.¹⁸

¹⁶ Jerram's *The Museum of the Moon* website provides a list of the places it has toured. https://my-Moon.org/past_presentations/.

¹⁷ 'Kendal's Lakes Alive festival features lunar artwork', BBC.com, 28 August 2016 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-cumbria-37208763> [accessed 29 December 2024]; and, <https://my-Moon.org/about/>.

¹⁸ Maya Marchel Hoff, 'Massive touring Earth installation comes to Bell Museum', The Minnesota Daily (4 August 2022). <https://mndaily.com/273300/arts-entertainment/massive-touring-earth-installation-comes-to-bell->

The Scottish artist Katie Paterson first recorded her interest in astronomy in 2007 when she wrote to about 100 astronomers to ‘collect documentation on the dead stars that have been witnessed’.¹⁹ The result, after two years of research, was a work that records just under 27,000 dead stars laser-etched onto a 200 by 300 centimetres black sheet of anodized aluminium. As Paterson noted in a 2016 interview: ‘This map represents everything that has been seen of stars dying, through a telescope. Some parts of the map are very dense with shapes and dots because that’s where most of our telescopes are concentrated’.²⁰

The Moon is the subject of Paterson’s earlier *Earth-Moon-Earth* (2007), which was the product of sending Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* to the Moon and back. The project wasn’t as simple as one might imagine. It involved basic radio transmission technology by a network of individuals and groups known as Moon Bouncers. To actually transmit the music, it had to be translated into Morse Code, sent in small batches from the UK, bounced off the surface of the Moon, and then the signals were captured in Sweden. The Morse Code had to be translated back into a musical score.²¹ The result has been played in a variety of venues. It sounds somewhat like Beethoven’s score at the beginning but then breaks down as the piece progresses because of signal degradation and distortions created by portions of the signal being absorbed by the Moon’s surface as well as bouncing off its uneven surface. The particular beauty and strength of *Earth-Moon-Earth* lies in having us refocus our attention on a piece of music so familiar we take it for granted and a celestial object we also tend to take for granted, getting us to imagine how the Moon’s pock-marked surface could affect a radio signal.²²

[museum/#:~:text=On%20Tuesday%2C%20July%2019%2C%20the,by%20U.K.%20artist%20Luke%20Jerram](#) [accessed 28 December 2024].

¹⁹ Veronica Simpson, ‘Katie Paterson: “As a child, I used to practice daydreaming”’, *Studio International* (22 May 2016).

<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/katie-paterson-interview-as-a-child-i-used-to-practice-daydreaming> [accessed 25 May 2024].

²⁰ Simpson, ‘Katie Paterson’.

²¹ Simpson, ‘Katie Paterson’; and, Elizabeth Fullerton, ‘Fleeting Little Thoughts: A Conversation with Katie Paterson’, *Sculpture Magazine* (April 21 2020).

<https://sculpturemagazine.art/fleeting-little-thoughts-a-conversation-with-katie-paterson/> [accessed 5 May 2024].

²² Paterson’s experiment in part inspired media artist Daniela de Paulis who, with the help of the staff running the Dwingeloo Radio Telescope at the C.A. Muller Radio Astronomy Station (CAMRAS) in the Netherlands, transmitted the famous group portrait of the Apollo 11 astronauts and bounced that off the

Paterson repeated *Earth-Moon-Earth* in 2008, this time sending John Cage's famous 1952 composition 4'33". However, Cage's work is 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence where the 'music' is the context in which the piece is performed.²³ It's not clear what was expected back after sending Cage's work to the Moon.

Paterson's 2016 *Totality* is a fascinating lunar piece which initially presents itself simply as a mirrored ball familiar to anyone who's spent time in a dance club. One may assume that the orb itself is the Moon, which it might be since it does reflect light, but on its surface are 10,000 images of solar eclipses dating back to 1778, documenting nearly every eclipse recorded by humans. The title refers to the ultimate phase of a total solar eclipse, while also referencing the fact that it incorporates nearly all our recorded total eclipses. These are reflected onto the walls and anyone in the space where the work is shown.²⁴ It's a hypnotic piece, unusual for an art gallery given the mirrored ball's traditional role, but fascinating in its concept. There's something fitting in having these images and their reflections in motion since eclipses as celestial events punctuate and amplify the fact that the celestial bodies of our Solar System are always moving and interrelated. However, *Totality* is not entirely successful as the projections tend to be mostly out of focus and diffused, only occasionally hitting the sweet spot of the focused throw of the image. Also, audiences tend to focus more on the sphere itself.

The Stars

The Canadian-British artist Angela Bulloch created a series of works titled *Night Sky*, the bulk of which were made between 2007 and 2013.²⁵ They involve LED lights set in neoprene supported by an aluminium frame. The

Moon. It was the first successful attempt at bouncing a visual image off the Moon and getting something readable back. See Daniela de Paulis, 'Visual Moonbounce: Images and Video in Moonbounce Technology', Conference proceedings, 15th International EME Conference, Churchill College, Cambridge, England 17-18 August 2012.

https://www.microwavers.org/eme2012/files/saturday/Daniela-de-Paulis_Visual-Moonbounce_EME2012-short.pdf.

²³ The work is described and documented by the artist on her website at <https://katiepaterson.org/artwork/earth-Moon-earth/>.

²⁴ *Totality* is beautifully documented on the artist's website at <https://katiepaterson.org/artwork/totality/>.

²⁵ On the beginnings of the *Night Sky* series, see Bulloch's *The Space That Time Forgot*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Walther König, 2008).

lights are computer programmed and project views of the night sky from an extraterrestrial vantage point, in other words from a perspective other than that on Earth. The configuration of the lights is determined using a program many astronomers and historians of astronomy are familiar with, Celestia.²⁶ The views change, rotating around a fixed point chosen by Bulloch. In offering a depiction of a night sky none of us will ever have, it begs the question as to why.

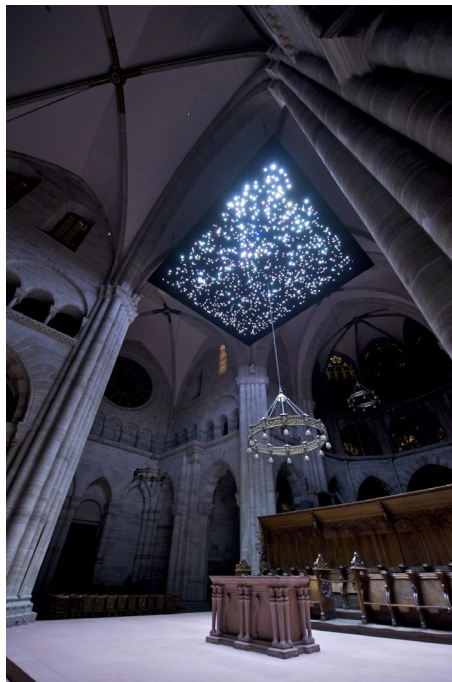


Fig. 7. Angela Bulloch, *Night Sky: Mercury and Venus*, 2010, LED-installation, felt, aluminum profiles, cables. Photo © Art Basel Photography.

Possibly the idea is to offer a perspective that reminds us that our own perception of the stars is far from unique and only one of an infinite number.²⁷ That though assumes one is familiar enough with the night sky

²⁶ <https://celestiaproject.space/>.

²⁷ Emily Steer, 'Star Power: How the Cosmos and Night Sky Inspire Contemporary Artists', *ArtNet* (24 April 2024). <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artists-inspired-night-sky-2473565> [accessed 30 December 2024].

to be able to recognize that what one sees in the Bulloch pieces is not from a terrestrial point of view. But even if this fact is related to us through a museum wall label, one wonders what the everyday viewer would do with the information. Bulloch's works appear one-dimensional in what they are trying to communicate, and this is a danger art faces in dealing with astronomical imagery. Art can easily fall into the trap of being merely illustrative and although there is the potential of at least being aesthetically pleasing, in many of those cases the originals far outshine our reproductions.

Some of Bulloch's night skies work best when installed in unique locations, suspended from ceilings such as was done at the 2008 group exhibition titled *anyspacewhatever* presented at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. As part of the Arts Parcours art fair in 2010, Bulloch installed a night sky in Basel Cathedral. Although not a religious person, Bulloch relished a church installation given the connection of religion with the celestial realm.²⁸



Fig. 8. Lita Albuquerque, *Stellar Axis: Antarctica*, 2006, pigment on 99 fiberglass spheres, dimensions vary, Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica. Photo: Jean de Pomereu.

²⁸ Gareth Harris, 'Interview with Angela Bulloch: Shining a light on the city', *The Art Newspaper* (31 May 2010).
<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2010/06/01/interview-with-angela-bulloch-shining-a-light-on-the-city> [accessed 30 December 2024].

In December 2006, funded by the National Science Foundation, The American artist Lita Albuquerque led a team to install a work on the Ross Ice Shelf in Antarctica.²⁹ It involved 99 ultramarine spheres laid out to echo the stellar configuration directly above at the time of the installation. The size of the spheres was determined by the magnitude of the stars with the largest around four feet in diameter, namely Sirius, the star that triggered Truman Burbank's story discussed earlier. The number was determined by the 99 names of the Islamic God Allah.³⁰ Albuquerque was raised in Tunisia as a child and felt a kinship with the Muslim faith. In fact, she did a version of the *Stellar Axis* in Egypt on the Giza plateau in 1996.³¹

On the summer solstice, Albuquerque coordinated a performance with residents of the McMurdo Research Center, tracing the movement of the stars over Antarctica, signalling the fact that the installation no longer echoed precisely the position of the stars above as it had when first completed with the aid of the astronomer Simon Balm. The red jackets, which are standard issue for the station, fit perfectly with Albuquerque's colour symbolism with the blue representing the sky, and red the Earth. The footprints left during the performance were a record of humanity's interaction and relationship to the universe. It is a relationship in which we are frightfully small and insignificant.

The location of the 2006 *Stellar Axis* could not have been better chosen. The isolation, cold, and vast emptiness of the Antarctic plateau, in other words, its general inhospitability echo that of space. The relative smallness of the blue spheres in relation to their setting reflects the small space occupied by stars. And lastly, there is the installation's inaccessibility. This might be somewhat diminished by our indirect access to the work, with the presentation of some of the spheres, documentary photographs, etc., in galleries and museums, yet this also mirrors our fascination with space and our presentation in galleries and museums of the paraphernalia of spatial exploration. In many ways, the *Stellar Axis: Antarctic* seems perfectly suited to its setting.

²⁹ *Lita Albuquerque: Stellar Axis*, exh. cat. (New York and Reno: Skira Rizzoli and the Nevada Museum of Art, 2014) and the artist's website at <https://www.litaalbuquerque.com/>.

³⁰ Anastassia Taylor, 'Mirroring Heaven on Earth: Stellar Axis South and 90 Degrees North', *Made in Bed: Sotheby's Institute of Art* (6 Feb. 2024). <https://www.madeinbed.co.uk/en-plein-air/mirroring-heaven-on-earth-stellar-axis-south-and-90-degrees-north> [accessed 5 May 2024].

³¹ *Lita Albuquerque: Stellar Axis*, pp.166–73.

A Conclusion

If the twentieth century was marked by an ambition of bettering nature with our advances in technology as announced by the Italian Futurists at the beginning of the century and competing with sunsets by the end of the same century, our current age seems humbler. Many of the art projects described above were certainly ambitious, yet their message seems to be one of understanding our place in the universe and realizing how small we are in its immensity. Our current technology has advanced phenomenally, but what it has shown us is just how much more insignificant we are. It recalls Blaise Pascal's famous quote:

Car enfin qu'est-ce que l'homme dans la nature? Un néant à l'égard de l'infini, un tout à l'égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout. Infiniment éloigné de comprendre les extrêmes, la fin des choses et leur principe sont pour lui invinciblement cachés dans un secret impénétrable, également incapable de voir le néant d'où il est tiré, et l'infini où il est englouti.

[For after all what is man in nature? A nothing in relation to infinity, all in relation to nothing, a central point between nothing and all and infinitely far from understanding either. The ends of things and their beginnings are impregnably concealed from him in an impenetrable secret. He is equally incapable of seeing the nothingness out of which he was drawn and the infinite in which he is engulfed.]

Pensées, 72, 1670