

Katie Paterson

Streetlight Storm: a series of streetlights flickering in time with lightning storms happening live across the world.

At any one time there are around 6000 lightning storms happening across the world, amounting to some 16 million storms each year. Such dizzying statistics are useful to hold in mind while experiencing *Streetlight Storm*, a new artwork by Katie Paterson for Deal Pier in Kent in which, for one month, from dusk until dawn, the pier lamps flicker in time with lightning strikes happening live in different parts of the world.

Katie Paterson creates poetic artworks exploring landscape, space and time, using technology to bring together the commonplace and the cosmic. Like other recent works by the artist, *Streetlight Storm* deftly harnesses everyday technology to connect with vast natural phenomena, collapsing the distance between us and remote meteorological events. *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* (2007) was a live phone line to a glacier in Iceland: upon dialling the advertised number, callers could listen in on the pops and trickles caused by the melting of Europe's largest glacier – an audible and poignant reminder of the reality of climate change. In *Streetlight Storm*, lightning signals from as far away as the North Pole to North Africa* are received by an antenna and translated into light. As the pattern of lightning strikes changes, so the pier lights oscillate correspondingly, with a subtlety that is in direct contrast to the power and drama of the storms they reflect.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the Enlightenment philosopher Edmund Burke wrote 'whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the Sublime'. It was Paterson's interest in sublime weather systems and the elements that originally drew her to investigate lightning storms, which like other potentially dangerous natural phenomena, inspire fascination and fear in equal measure. JMW Turner, the artist perhaps most closely associated with landscape and the Sublime in British art, produced numerous paintings inspired by the quality of light, changing skies and often turbulent seas of the East Kent coast. Deal's own history as a maritime port and an important anchorage point for ships taking refuge from gales off the North Foreland is highlighted in his watercolour *Deal* (1826-28, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool), in which a cluster of ships is shown sheltering from an incoming storm off the coast of the town.

More recently, during the 1960s and 70s, the artists associated with Land and Environmental Art responded to the landscape by making direct physical interventions within it. Walter de Maria's famous *The Lightning Field* (1977) is comprised of a grid of 400 stainless steel poles situated on a high plain in New Mexico, the area with the highest density of lightning in North America. When lightning strikes the poles, they ignite to create a net of visible electrical charges. Designed to be witnessed over an extended period of time, part of

* although NASA's world lightning map makes clear that storm activity is lowest at the Poles and highest over those countries nearest to the Equator

the experience of *The Lightning Field*, is related to the viewer's experience of nature and the changing effects of heat and light over time. Similarly, an experience of both time and place, of gazing out to the horizon from the pier, is an important element of *Streetlight Storm*. As Katie Paterson has said of the work: *In this contemplative and evocative place, of sleepy strolls and lapping waves, the gentle flickering of the lights will unfold between dusk, darkness and dawn, reflecting on the water through the night.'*

Fittingly for an artist so engaged with concepts of time, the beginning of *Streetlight Storm* coincides with the Winter Solstice, a moment in time which occurs during the shortest day (or longest night) of the year. Standing on the pier as the sun goes down the audience will experience the effects of distant lightning storms, relayed live by means of radio technology, in real time. In contrast, other works by the artist have sought to manifest time on a cosmic scale, as in *All the Dead Stars* (2009) shown in the recent Tate Triennial exhibition: a map documenting the locations of the 27,000 dead stars that have been recorded and observed by humankind.

Katie Paterson developed this work for the Vauxhall Collective Fine Art Commission in response to the brief 'reinventing British classics'. She was attracted by the unique architecture of the current concrete pier, which opened in 1957, exactly 100 years after the original pier was destroyed, appropriately enough, by a lightning storm. The commission sees this distinctive symbol of the classic English coastal town transformed over the festive period in a 'reinvention' of familiar seaside illuminations. Here, as the lamps glimmer almost imperceptibly, we are reminded of storms at sea and the beauty and destructive power of nature's own light show.

Sarah Martin
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Katie Paterson is a member of the Vauxhall Collective
2009 www.vauxhallcollective.co.uk <<http://www.vauxhallcollective.co.uk>> .
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