

Julian Charrière  
Katie Paterson

## JULIAN CHARRIÈRE AND KATIE PATERSON: METEORS AND METABOLISMS

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18 December, 2021 –  
26 March, 2022

In *The New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, published in 1744, the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico develops an astonishing theory of history based on an imaginary account of the origins of humanity. The first human communities, he writes, lived in dense forests that covered almost the entirety of the earth, still wet from the great flood. The act of cutting down trees to create clearings, which were more conducive to establishing communities, changed something for the humans: they suddenly had an unobstructed view of the sky, which previously they could only glimpse through the dense forest. With the genesis of the *clearing*, the first thunderclaps were interpreted as messages, while the first lightning bolts were seen as signs from the first God; the sky became a space of meaning, a screen on which divine messages were displayed. Moreover, most of the major gods, right up to Zeus and Jupiter in the Greek and Roman pantheons, are associated with being able to control thunder and lightning. This theory of human space conceived by Vico, who sees in the first appearance of the cosmos the origins of the notion of divinity, and links the circulation of signs to the abandonment of forest habitats, could equally affect the theory of art. To put it concisely: it is by pruning the forest teeming with signals that we reach the specific apparatus of the sign—which comes to stand out, like a flash of lightning, against the plane of visibility developed by the artist. The forest and the sky undoubtedly represent the two poles of the human imagination—and now both prove to be tangibly endangered by globalized productivism.

Katie Paterson and Julian Charrière are currently exhibiting in parallel, combining their works in the same space within an exhibition framework they have developed together. In both of their oeuvres, human existence itself is not shown, but is instead resituated in its cosmic or geological position, represented in the general context of the biomass. And both, in their respective works, implement temporalities of great amplitude. Their works could thus belong to a *neo-metaphysical* movement in contemporary art, which will undoubtedly remain associated with the beginning of the twenty-first century in future accounts of the history of art. Because the essential question for the artists of our time is the meaning of their work in a world in danger. This question is linked to a search for symbolic interlocutors: Who should we address? The Sumerian worshippers, Roman bas-reliefs and Byzantine icons addressed the deities while reflecting their presence on earth. At the other end of history, we find those artists who emerged in the 1990s and belong to what I called *relational* art, who constructed their forms from their social sphere (passers-by, neighbors, close communities ...). Today, a new generation of artists is focusing on the non-human “great outdoors,” and deep time: for them, it is reality as a whole (including atoms, rocks, micro-organisms and machines) that now plays the role of symbolic in-

terlocutor, and forms the plane on which their work unfolds. Both Julian Charrière and Katie Paterson trace the human sphere by means of the immensities on which it depends: the atmosphere and the lithosphere. The consideration of the existence of an *outdoors*, the search for a cosmos within which human activity could be reflected and take on a collective meaning, clearly alludes to the mental space created by awareness of the *capitalocene*: human existence can only be represented on the basis of the industrial saturation of the planet, the loss of distances and the feeling of *remoteness*, the dangerous proximity between humans and other life forms—so many elements that are all redrawing our mental space. In other words, the outside world, like resources that can be exploited by the global economy, is now moving from the distant to the near, shrinking our space-time. The works of Julian Charrière and Katie Paterson take the opposite path, for they use the vocabulary of art to create space, to expand our vision of the world to the extreme points of human experience, the tiny and the gigantic—from a quark to the Milky Way, from dust particles to a glacier. Neither of them depicts individual humans in their works: in the course of one human life, there will be around four hundred thousand generations of bacteria (which, on a human scale, would represent ten million years). It is better to go straight to the point, that is, to sculpt the flow of life itself, and to superimpose these two temporalities in order to arrive at a *realistic* representation of the world, that is, one that is definitively rid of the illusion that humanity is at its center.

The term “great outdoors” is being asserted by a new generation of philosophers, gathered under the umbrella of “speculative realism,” who have developed a representation of the world oriented towards the world of objects: a human being is nothing more than an object endowed with a greater sensibility than a stone or a plant. The idea of focusing on the non-human, on ancient time or infinite spaces, testifies, according to Tristan Garcia, “*to a certain weariness of the human subject with regard to the contemplation of their own omnipotence.*” Indeed, humans have ended up exhausting themselves in cultural, economic, and existential *loops*, in which they are unable to glimpse anything more than their own distorted reflection: that of a species that has become a slave to its own technical power. “*Culture,*” explains Garcia, “*has called for an outdoors once again; this outdoors is visible in the reappearance of nature without humans in our current aesthetic, in the idea of the postapocalyptic (imagining the world as it will be once we are no longer there, once culture has ceased to exist).*”<sup>1</sup> We thus find ourselves before a distressing choice: on the one hand, the “great outdoors” of an inhuman universe, on the other, the frightening process of the self-colonization of humans by humans. With very different tools and formal approaches, Katie Paterson and Julian Charrière turn toward this *great outdoors*. Paterson creates forms, sometimes close to invisible, which can also be summarized by the following statements:

*A mix tape of every sound that exists*  
*A watch displaying the number of times the sun has risen*  
*The milky way compressed into a diamond*

So many propositions embodied by material objects, whose common feature is a desire to compress the world into a series of exact points, a sort of condensation of the infinite into a quintessence. Hence the omnipresence of instruments for measuring time in her work: candles, calendars, or even the annual growth rings of trees. The clock is a paradoxical object that reduces the infinity of time to cogs and human measurements.

<sup>1</sup>Tristan Garcia, “Weird Realism: Lovecraft and philosophy de Graham Harman,” Spirale, Canada, <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/spirale/2016-n255-spirale02442/81114ac.pdf>

While Katie Paterson transforms cosmic space into spatial markers and visual signals, Julian Charrière realizes geological time—or historical sedimentations—in sculptural forms, extracted from the *longue durée*. His works on the Bikini Atoll, long impacted by nuclear tests, or on the mineral formations of Antarctica, blend the brief duration of human history with the patient formations of the physical world. Both artists make use of the same array of tools: matter, energy and information. But Paterson focuses more on light, and Charrière on atomic mass. These are two elements of the process of *morphogenesis*—the production of the universe by the universe itself. The flow of biomass is more important than the beings emerging from these flows. For the philosopher Manuel DeLanda, “*The rocks and mountain that define the most stable and durable elements of our reality would merely represent a local slowing down of this flowing reality. It is almost as if every part of the mineral world could be defined simply by specifying its chemical composition and its speed of flow: very slow for rocks, faster for lava.*”<sup>2</sup> And even faster for light, Katie Paterson’s material of choice. Charrière’s and Paterson’s visual grammars represent two distinct sampling speeds, two different modes of extracting information from the flows that constitute the matter of the world. If I were to differentiate them by metaphor, I would compare Katie Paterson’s works to meteors: this term refers to the luminous trail produced when an extraterrestrial body, such as shooting stars or what are known as *bolides*, enters our atmosphere. Like her works, the meteor displays a brilliant yet transient glow, as it conveys, in the brief period of its terrestrial appearance, a distant phenomenon of very long duration. *Totality* (2016) works in this manner: every solar eclipse documented by the human race has been depicted by Paterson on the surface of a mirror ball that illuminates the space with its twinkling. What remains is light, the unique and ultimate “apparition of a distant thing”<sup>3</sup> that is disappearing from planet Earth.

In contrast, Julian Charrière proceeds by *metabolization*: the assimilative process of the body, in other words the sum of biochemical reactions that occur in living matter. And his work seems to metabolize, in the context of his exhibitions, a landscape of immense phenomena: in *On the Sidewalk, I Have Forgotten the Dinosauria* (2013), for example, the artist drilled to a depth of eighty meters in Berlin, presenting these mineral core samples as a materialization of time. This is a sampling aesthetic that is almost archaeological. This fascination with fossils brings Charrière closer to the world of Robert Smithson, whose “ruins in reverse” and interest in prehistoric times and archaeology posed new questions for art in the 1960s. On the other hand, Paterson’s formal influences are found more in minimal art, notably in the work of On Kawara, and more particularly in *One Million Years* (1971), a post-human enumeration of time that was one of the first works to engage in a dialogue with artificial intelligence. Charrière tends to *crystallize* gases and liquids, or sample mineral masses, while Paterson devises calendars or transforms solids into *rays of light*.

But both of them share another similarity, one that is aptly summarized by this quote from Georges Bataille: “*Only a few of us, amid the great fabrications of society, (...) still wonder naively what we are doing on the earth and what sort of joke is being played on us. We want to decipher skies and paintings, go behind these starry backgrounds or these painted canvases and, like kids trying to find a gap in a fence, try to look through the cracks in the world.*”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (Zone Books, 1997), p. 258.

<sup>3</sup> This is the definition of the aura of a work of art, according to Walter Benjamin.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Cruel Practice of Art*, <https://supervert.com/elibrary/georges-bataille/cruel-practice-of-art>

Taking into account the current situation of the earth in a radical way, Julian Charrière and Katie Paterson opt for the sky and its “starry backgrounds,” crystallization and fossilization.