

30th IAA SYMPOSIUM ON SPACE AND SOCIETY (E5)
Contemporary Arts Practice and Outer Space: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach (3)

Author: Ms. Melanie King
Royal College of Art, United Kingdom, melanie.king@network.rca.ac.uk

ANCIENT LIGHT: REMATERIALISING THE ASTRONOMICAL IMAGE

Abstract

How can the field of astronomical photography, viewed through the lens of new materialism and photographic theory, alter our collective perception of ecology? How can the entanglement of astronomy, materiality and thingness alter our perception of the status of the photograph?

Ancient Light is a tale of capturing photons from incredibly distant stars. It is rooted within my fear of the incomprehensibly vast universe, burning with millions of suns. My feeling of anxiety about our vast universe is also inextricably linked to an immense joy and serenity that comes to us when we view a sky full of stars.

Ancient Light considers the moment in which the photon is created within the energetic furnace of a star, the long and tireless journey of the photon from a star to Earth, and the eventual absorption of the photon within photosensitive silver gelatin film. At the heart of this study is an exploration into new materialism, considering how the study of materiality and processes can affect our conception of the world around us. New materialism also triggers an enquiry into the materiality of the photographic, the ontology of the photograph itself.

Within this presentation, I draw upon voices of artists, astronomers, philosophers and writers who consider what it is to capture Ancient Light; scientific theories intermingle with new materialist theory and photographic texts.

My practice-based research has taken me on a journey far and wide, including collaborative projects with the UCLO Observatory in London, Kielder Observatory on the border of England and Scotland, the Laboratory for Dark Matter Research in Boulby, UK and the EU Commission in Ispra, Italy. I have participated in residencies in Iceland, Italy, Spain, Grizedale Forest, UK and Cornwall, UK to spend time under the night sky. For my research, I have also looked at analogue astronomical specimens within the UCL Space History Archive and the Royal Astronomical Society in London. Further afield, I have visited the Mount Wilson Observatory, Carnegie Archives and Hale Solar Laboratory in California, USA as well as the European Space Agency in Leiden, the Netherlands.