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## Abstract

Non-human temporalities and scales are vast and difficult to comprehend when approached solely through human perception. This essay addresses the question of how contemporary art mediates the perception of non-human temporalities across terrestrial and cosmic scales. It argues that contemporary artistic approaches render such temporalities perceptible by compressing, translating, and staging time through material and participatory means. These strategies enable the condensation of vast temporal processes into perceptible forms, allowing access to phenomena that exceed direct sensory experience. Drawing on the work of Scottish artist Katie Paterson, particularly *Requiem* (2022) and *First There is a Mountain* (2019), the essay demonstrates how similar approaches operate across cosmic and terrestrial scales to produce distinct perceptual outcomes. While *Requiem* operates through accumulation and compression at a cosmic scale, *First There is a Mountain* foregrounds process, duration, and dissolution within a terrestrial context. This analysis is informed by philosophical approaches to temporality, perception, and scale, particularly in relation to duration, embodiment, and distributed phenomena. Through these approaches, engagement with large-scale environmental processes is supported, contributing to a broader understanding of the human position within the universe. This situates human experience within extended ecological and cosmic systems, while acknowledging its inherent limitations.

## **ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module**

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Question 4. Time, Memory and the Archive: In what ways do contemporary artists and designers reimagine time, memory, and archival practice, whether through repetition, rupture, slowness, or non-linear temporality? How do these temporal aesthetics intersect with cultural, technological, or historical concerns?

# **Rendering Non-human Time Perceptible**

Contemporary Art Across  
Terrestrial and Cosmic Scales

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*“no vestige of a beginning,—no prospect of an end”*  
(Hutton, 1795)

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## Introduction

Contemporary art increasingly engages with non-human temporalities that extend beyond the scale of human experience, operating across both terrestrial and cosmic dimensions. These forms of time, geological, ecological, and cosmic, challenge the limits of human perception, as they unfold across durations and scales that cannot be directly observed or fully comprehended. As a result, the question of how such temporalities can be rendered perceptible becomes central to contemporary artistic practice.

This essay addresses the question of how contemporary art mediates the perception of non-human temporalities across terrestrial and cosmic scales. It argues that contemporary artistic strategies render non-human temporalities perceptible by compressing, translating, and staging time through material and participatory strategies. In doing so, these practices extend how the temporalities can be experienced and understood, foreground non-human perspectives, and bring them into the field of human perception while maintaining their inherent limits.

The discussion focuses on the work of Scottish artist Katie Paterson, whose practice operates across both terrestrial and cosmic scales. Through an analysis of selected works, *Requiem* (2022) and *First There is a Mountain* (2019), the essay examines how temporal mediation is achieved through strategies such as material condensation, scale compression, and participation. This intra-practice approach enables comparison within a single artistic framework, highlighting how similar strategies produce distinct perceptual outcomes depending on context.

The analysis is informed by theoretical perspectives on time, perception, and scale, drawing in particular on the work of Kant, Bergson, and Deleuze in relation to temporality, Merleau-Ponty in relation to perception, and Timothy Morton in relation to scale and distributed phenomena. Together, these frameworks provide a basis for understanding how contemporary art engages with the limits of perception and renders non-human temporalities partially accessible to human experience.

# Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical frameworks that inform the analysis of time, perception, and scale in contemporary art.

## Time

Time has been conceptualised in multiple ways within philosophical discourse, reflecting differing assumptions about perception and experience. This section focuses on three key conceptions of time, by Kant, Bergson, and Deleuze, to frame how contemporary art mediates temporal perception.

Beginning with the concept of structured time, as articulated by Kant (Kant, 1998), this framework positions time as organising all appearances, establishes order and succession, and renders experience measurable. For Kant, time functions as a universal a priori form that orders appearances through succession and relation, thereby making structured temporal experience possible. Kant conceptualises time as “a necessary representation ... therefore given a priori ... Time has only one dimension; different times are not coexistent but successive.” (Kant, 1998, p.88).

An alternative philosophical account of time comes from Henri Bergson, who developed a concept of continuous time, also called *durée*. In this model, time is indivisible and becomes lived and felt. The qualitative nature of duration foregrounds the lived experience, in contrast to the Kantian spatialised model of time (Bergson, 2018). Bergson distinguishes between homogeneous, quantitative time and a qualitative duration in which moments are not distinct but instead “permeate one another ... melting into one another and forming an organic whole.” (Bergson, 2018, p. 128).

Building on Bergson, Gilles Deleuze further develops the theory of time, grounded in multiplicity (Deleuze, 1991). Deleuze reworks Bergson’s theory by foregrounding multiplicity and repetition within a heterogeneous framework (Williams, 2011). This interpretation emphasises the processual aspects of time and focuses on the layered temporality. Deleuze distinguishes between the present, the past and the future (Deleuze, 1991). For the purpose of this work the focus will be the past (memory) and the future (becoming). The former refers to time as the accumulated past, which is not gone but rather preserved. It becomes layered and coexisting within duration, which Deleuze describes as “an internal multiplicity of succession ... a virtual and continuous multiplicity that cannot be reduced to numbers” (Deleuze, 1991, p.38). The latter reflects the transformational aspect of time, introduces

change and unpredictability, a constant transformation and explains how future breaks from the past.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that time cannot be directly apprehended. More precisely, it is accessible only through mediation, particularly at non-human scales, and contemporary artworks of Paterson render this perceptible.

## Perception

Perception provides a crucial framework for understanding how time is experienced in the artworks. It can be approached through the lens of perceiving time, as a natural progression through this theoretical section. Following Merleau-Ponty, “Time is ...not a real process ... It arises from my relation to things ... What is past or future for me is present in the world.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 478), this interpretation clearly articulates the mediation in the perception of time. It also highlights that neither past nor future are fixed, as discussed by Bergson and Deleuze. Perception, understood as that which appears in experience, functions as the primary mode of access to the world. It is embodied in the sense that the body is the subject, and we perceive the world through the body itself, from within the world rather than from a detached position. Experience mediates access to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). The body therefore is a condition of perception, as Merleau-Ponty writes “I perceive with my body...” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 277). As the body can only perceive from a point of view, this process is necessarily partial. It follows that perception is active, not passive. As the body is always in relation to the observed object, perception is inherently relational.

## Scale

Scale provides the final key framework for understanding the artworks. Timothy Morton developed a theory centred around the term hyperobjects (Morton, 2013a), which provide the theoretical grounding for this section. Hyperobjects are massively distributed in time and space, not fully perceivable and exceeding human cognition (Morton, 2013a), thereby highlighting their inaccessibility. Their temporal distribution ventures into deep time, that is, time of such magnitude that it is ungraspable and only partially perceivable through the vastness of changes over cosmic and geological time. Connected to their vastness, they are also characterised by non-locality, meaning they cannot be experienced in full, only in fragments, reinforcing the limits of perceptual access to such phenomena (Morton, 2013a; Morton, 2013b). The artworks analysed work with such hyperobjects and scale and this framework is essential for their understanding. Together, these frameworks provide a conceptual basis for analysing how contemporary artworks mediate non-human temporalities across different scales.

# Artworks

## Requiem (2022)

Katie Paterson's *Requiem* (2022) artwork (Figure 1) "tells of the birth and life of our planet in a single object" (Paterson, 2022). The work is grounded in powdered remnants of substances and objects dating from pre-solar times to the present day. The key concept the artist is working with here is the translation of time through material condensation. This strategy is activated through audience participation, which brings the material into process. It is also accompanied by a detailed text listing geological and factual descriptions of all 364 samples written by Jan Zalasiewicz, Emeritus Professor of Palaeobiology. The layers of time turned into literal dust facilitate the perception of deep time by connecting it with the material world. As Zalasiewicz describes in the accompanying text "This layer of dust preserves the fruits of this achievement." (Zalasiewicz, 2022, p.37). The art project was commissioned by the National Glass Centre, Sunderland Culture, and Ingleby Gallery.



**Figure 1.** *Requiem* (2022), installation view showing glass vials and central urn (Paterson, 2022).

**Time** in *Requiem* appears at the outset as structured (Kant, 1998), yet that initial organisation is gradually disrupted by the action of viewer participation. The participatory element aligns this artwork with Bergson's concept of *durée* of flow and indivisibility. The narrative of Earth's story is sequential (meteorites, geological eras, biological emergence, human cultures) (Figure 2) which connects to Kant's sequential and organised concept of time. At the same time, the mixing process introduces the flow of material and time which is followed by the collapse of order and multiplicity of layers. These correspond to Bergson's and Deleuze's temporal conceptualisations, respectively. The artwork stages a shift between two contrasting temporalities, from the initially organised, segmented one, to the ungraspable, continuous one. Eventually, it all combines and flows together (Deleuze, 1991), enacting a temporal transformation through participation. Time feels layered, aggregated, and non-linear. The viewer action functions as temporal activation, as Paterson said, "Each is a layer of time waiting to be poured" (Paterson, 2022). What emerges is that time is inherently vast, cosmic, and not possible to perceive in whole, only a fragmented view of it can be experienced.



**Figure 2.** *Requiem* (2022), detail of glass vials containing powdered materials (Paterson, 2022).

The artwork engages with **scale** through the compression of total planetary history into one object, as described by Paterson, “Birth and life of our planet in a single object” (Paterson, 2022). This gives the viewer a chance to experience cosmic vastness through scale compression of a distributed phenomenon (Morton, 2013a). Moreover, to create the artwork itself, a collaboration with institutions worldwide had to take place, which echoes the distributed phenomena from Morton again, as means of addressing distributed scale. Scale unfolds across multiple dimensions in the artwork. Firstly, the vast scale of deep time throughout which the art piece operates. This can be recognised through imagination, and it is based in hundreds of vials filled with remnants of past eras. Secondly, scale of the remains themselves, being in form of powder, resolved to fine dust of remains what used to be larger pieces of rocks and materials from eras gone by. This can be literally perceived as the dust present in vials in front of the viewer/participant. Thirdly, the scale of the process of forming the planet Earth and life as we know it, observed through the participation and active creation of a temporal experience. This can be observed through pouring the dust and powder into the singular vessel, the urn, and perceived as an act of creation and at the same time destruction on cosmic level (Figure 3). Whilst there is a physical limitation on the number of viewers becoming participants in the creation act of the final version of the artwork, without the act of participation there would be no final piece. Therefore, there is a greater importance put on the participatory act. Taken together, the vast cosmic scale is rendered perceptible by means of various mediation strategies.



**Figure 3.** *Requiem* (2022), participant pouring material into the central urn (Paterson, 2022).

More specifically, in *Requiem*, **mediation** enables the perception of non-human time. Material condensation, participation, and real-time staging support the experience and render the concept of deep time graspable, even if only partially. Non-human time is measured not in lifetimes but in cosmic and geological terms which are far vaster than a human being's time on Earth. These other means of measure extend the horizon of understanding, though within limits, and the language around them supports further conceptual engagement. The minimalistic material condensation and accumulation on a micro-scale, alongside the movement of dust from vials to the urn, makes deep time graspable in the viewer's hand and reshapes perception. The method of miniaturising and using scale as a tool in visualising complex and vastly spread hyperobjects enables a necessarily partial understanding.

In *Requiem*, **perception** is both imaginative and reflective, engaging with materiality and powdered fossilised remnants of pre-solar time, spanning Earth's creation, the origins of life and extinction events to the present. Viewers can interact with the art project by selecting one of the 364 glass vials and pouring a tablespoon of dust into the central glass urn, making it the 365th container in the room and referencing a full solar cycle – the time Earth needs to circle the Sun. In doing so, the viewer contributes to an accumulation, forming a collective temporal body (Figure 4). As the central urn is being filled, participants can reflect not only on individual eras and periods but also on their destruction, passing, and extinction. The urn acts as a symbolic form of mourning and finality, connecting the concept of time to becoming and disappearance, understood as continuous transformation (Deleuze, 1994). Following Merleau-Ponty, perception is understood as indirect and embodied; deep time cannot be directly perceived and is instead accessed through imagination. While some experience the work as viewers, selected individuals are invited to take part, shifting from passive observation to active engagement. This engagement further introduces an additional layer of experience, transforming ordered sequences into processes of activity, flow, and change. In this way, participants become co-creators of the final piece, as the contents of the urn are collectively accumulated through their actions. Thus, perception in *Requiem* is actively constructed through participation, rendering non-human time perceptible while remaining inherently partial.

Deep time and cosmic scale are brought into perception through the **artistic strategies** of material condensation, scale distribution, and minimalism. It demonstrates how vastness can be brought closer and contained (Figure 4), though, due to the nature of deep time, it can never be fully perceived, and only a fragmented view is accessible to the viewer. This directly relates to the limits of perception. These specific strategies render cosmic scale and deep time perceptible within constraints and provide a foundation for the viewer's imagination to further extrapolate the concepts beyond the material realm. In *Requiem*, the dominating material strategy is accumulation, contrasting with the dissemination present in the other artwork

analysed. The structure is introduced through sequenced time which contrasts with the other artwork. Its operation within a cosmic scale is another point of contrast. This positions *Requiem* as a model of accumulation, sequenced time, and cosmic scale, setting up a contrast with the more processual and terrestrial logic of the following artwork.

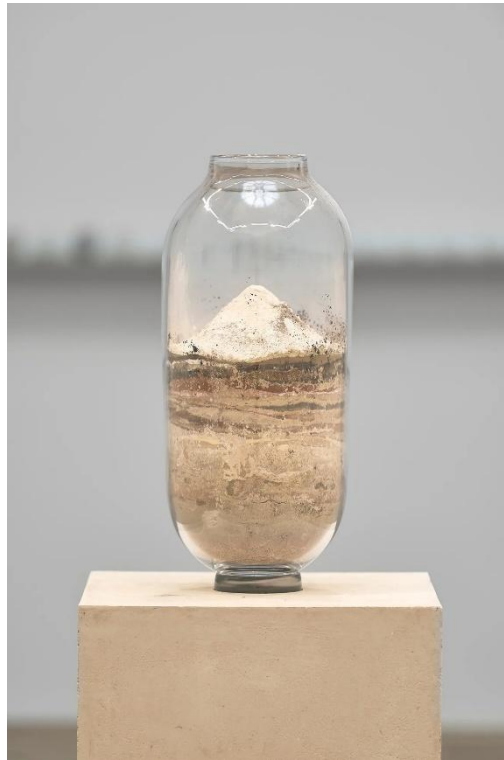


**Figure 4.** *Requiem* (2022), close-up of the central urn containing accumulated and mixed powdered materials (Paterson, 2022).

### First There is a Mountain (2019)

Katie Paterson's *First There is a Mountain* (2019) explores non-human temporality through the use of beach sand as its primary material. The work focuses on the translation of time through material condensation and environmental inscription. Participants are invited to construct miniature versions of world mountains (Figure 5) using sand, only for them to be gradually eroded and dissolved by natural forces such as wind and tide. Alongside the material installation, the project is accompanied by an anthology, which deepens its conceptual and reflective dimension (Paterson, 2019). As Patrick Barkham writes, "As we build our mountains, we remember that our labours are ephemeral, our lives are short and everything must change." (Barkham, 2019, p.57).



**Figure 5.** *First There is a Mountain* (2019), moulds in the shapes of mountain forms used for constructing sand structures (Paterson, 2019).

**Time** in *First There is a Mountain* is presented as an ongoing, processual phenomenon, defined by duration, loss, and transformation. The work engages with Bergson's concept of *durée*, where time is understood as continuous flow rather than fixed sequence (Bergson, 2018), and it aligns with Deleuze's notion of becoming (Deleuze, 1994). Viewers are transformed into participants. They create ephemeral sculptures from sand representing mountain peaks, placing them on the shoreline where they are gradually dissolved by natural forces (Figure 6). This unfolding process of creation, existence and dissolution reveals time as continuous and transformative, rather than stable or fixed. The flowing movement of wind and water disassembles the sculptural forms, eventually reabsorbing them into their place of origin with no trace remaining. In this way, the work encapsulates both the formation and the degradation of mountain chains across deep time, processes that are otherwise imperceptible within a human lifetime. The participant builds something, but that act is immediately tied to erosion and disappearance, rendering time perceptible as cyclical and transformative, moving from creation to dissolution. Deep time is thus not a fixed sequence, but an embedded and ongoing process revealed through material transformation.



**Figure 6.** *First There is a Mountain* (2019), participants filling mountain-shaped moulds with sand on the shoreline (Paterson, 2019).

The artwork engages with **scale** at a terrestrial level, while simultaneously condensing geological processes into perceptible form. As in *Requiem*, scale operates across multiple dimensions, though here it is grounded in the physicality of Earth's surface. Firstly, the vastness of terrestrial scale is referenced through the recreation of major mountain peaks, many of which are otherwise inaccessible or impossible to fully experience in their real magnitude. Secondly, spatial scale is condensed, as distances between these mountains are reduced to a confined area of a single beach. Thirdly, geological time is compressed into a short temporal frame, where mountains are created, exist and are subsequently dissolved within a single tidal cycle. This process, which normally unfolds over millions of years, becomes observable, though only partially, through imaginative reconstruction. Finally, material scale is transformed: the immense physical mass of mountains is reduced to grains of sand, enabling direct perception and comparison (Figure 7). In this way, Morton's concepts of temporal scale and non-locality are activated, as vast and distributed phenomena are brought into a graspable, localised form (Morton, 2013a). Taken together, scale is condensed across space, time, and material, allowing geological vastness to be experienced at a human level.



**Figure 7.** *First There is a Mountain* (2019), sand mountain forms constructed on the beach prior to erosion (Paterson, 2019).

In *First There is a Mountain*, **mediation** operates through material condensation, participation, and conceptual minimalism to shape perception. Viewers become participants by creating ephemeral sand sculptures, initiating a process that unfolds from construction to erosion. Through this participatory act, temporality is staged in real time, making processes of transformation directly observable. The work also introduces a dimension of ecological mourning, as creation is immediately tied to disappearance and loss. These strategies shift perception beyond the immediate material interaction towards broader temporal and environmental processes, inviting engagement with what exceeds direct perception. As perception remains inherently partial, the modulation of scale and process provides the viewer with a framework through which to construct understanding. In this sense, mediation does not resolve the limits of perception, but instead enables a structured engagement with them, supported by imagination and embodied experience.

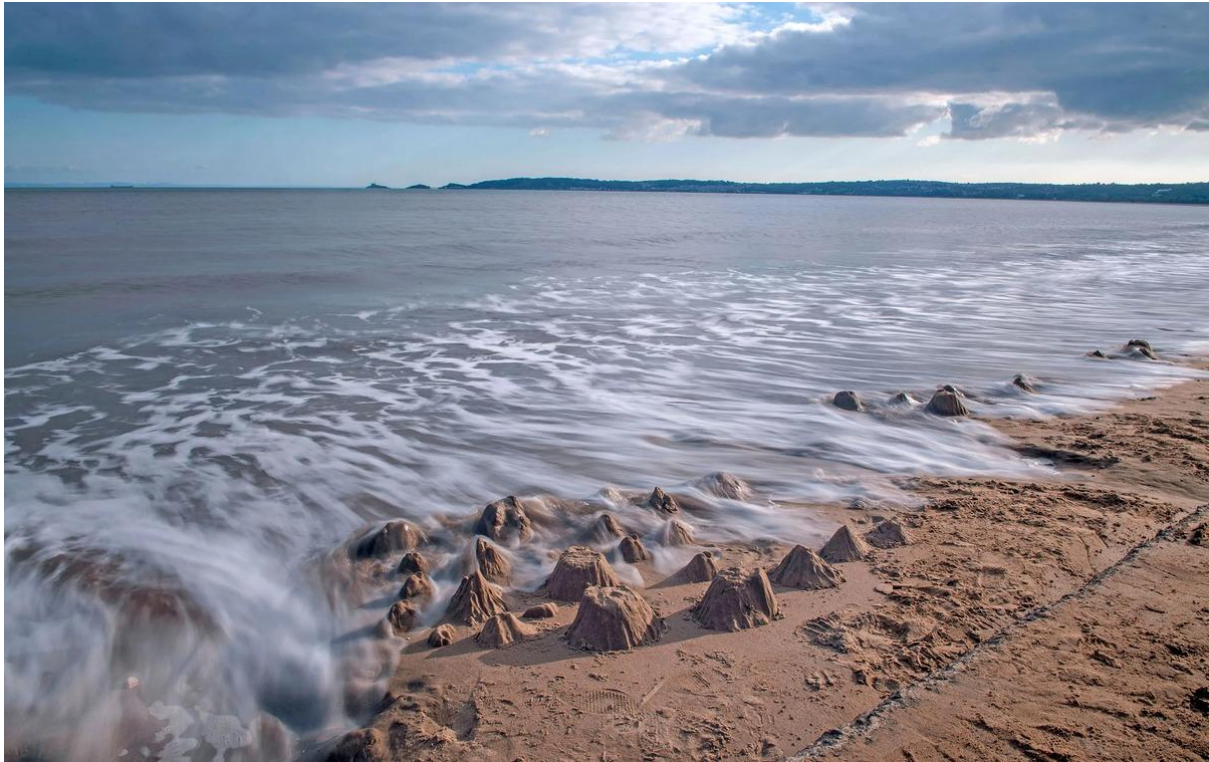


**Figure 8.** *First There is a Mountain* (2019), incoming tide beginning to erode and dissolve the sand structures (Paterson, 2019).

**Perception** in *First There is a Mountain* is immediate and embodied, grounded in direct engagement with material and process. Viewers become participants as they select a modelled form of a mountain, fill it with sand and construct it on the shoreline, where it is gradually eroded by the movement of tide and wind (Figure 8). As these forms are disseminated and absorbed back into the surrounding environment, participants witness their disappearance, a process that mirrors geological transformations otherwise incomprehensible within a human lifetime. The intimacy created by the miniature scale and restricted timeframe enables this process to be observed, while also emphasising its transience. Following Merleau-Ponty, perception here is indirect and embodied; deep time, scale and duration cannot be directly perceived and are instead accessed through imagination (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). While the act of participation is less interventionist than in *Requiem*, it remains central to the experience. It positions viewers as co-creators through their role in both construction and observation. What cannot be perceived directly is the full temporal and spatial scale across which these processes occur; instead, the work relies on micro-scale representation to support imaginative reconstruction. Thus, perception operates through the tension between presence and disappearance, reflecting Bergson's *durée* and Deleuze's concept of becoming,

where time is experienced as continuous transformation rather than fixed form (Bergson, 2018; Deleuze, 1994).

*First There is a Mountain* introduces a set of **artistic strategies** that mediate the perception of different forms of time. Through material condensation and conceptual minimalism, the work reduces geological processes to the scale of sand and micro-forms. The condensation of time brings cycles of creation, existence, and dissolution into a single tidal rhythm, while the condensation of space reduces the distance between geographically dispersed mountains to a single, localised site. Through this, viewers are able to experience processes that would otherwise unfold across vast temporal and spatial scales within a single moment of perception. The methods employed by the artist generate a multilayered experience, aligning with Deleuze's concept of temporal multiplicity, where multiple processes, i.e., creation, erosion, environmental forces and human intervention, are perceived simultaneously in real time (Deleuze, 1991).

## Comparative Analysis

As demonstrated through this intra-practice analysis, Katie Paterson's work with time, scale and materiality produces distinct perceptual outcomes through the deployment of related strategies. In *Requiem*, time is structured and sequential before collapsing into multiplicity, while in *First There is a Mountain* it is experienced as duration, leading to dissolution. Scale similarly diverges across the two works, with *Requiem* operating at a cosmic level and *First There is a Mountain* at a terrestrial one, both mediated through material condensation. The dominant material strategies further differentiate the works, with accumulation in *Requiem* contrasting with dissolution in *First There is a Mountain*. Finally, perception shifts from assembling time in *Requiem* to witnessing time in *First There is a Mountain*. Together, these works demonstrate how contemporary artistic strategies render non-human temporalities perceptible across different scales, while maintaining the limits of human perception.

## Conclusion

Contemporary art strategies mediate non-human temporalities and render them perceptible across cosmic and terrestrial scales. Whether time is understood as structured in a Kantian sense, experienced as duration following Bergson, or conceived as multiplicity and becoming in Deleuze's terms, it remains inherently partial and cannot be directly apprehended (Kant, 1998; Bergson, 2018; Deleuze, 1991; Deleuze, 1994). In the case of hyperobjects operating across vast temporal and spatial scales, as outlined by Morton, mediation becomes necessary

to grasp their magnitude and operation (Morton, 2013a). Artistic strategies enable this mediation, making such temporalities perceptible while remaining necessarily incomplete. Perception, as understood through Merleau-Ponty, is grounded in embodied experience and is therefore always situated and partial, reinforcing the limits through which non-human time can be accessed (Merleau-Ponty, 2002).

Across the two artworks analysed, similar strategies, including material condensation, participation and scale compression, produce distinct outcomes. In *Requiem*, time is structured and accumulative before collapsing into multiplicity, operating at a cosmic scale. In contrast, *First There is a Mountain* presents time as duration and process, grounded in terrestrial scale and leading to dissolution. These differences demonstrate how the application of shared strategies shapes the experience of time in materially and conceptually distinct ways.

More broadly, this suggests that contemporary art does not simply represent non-human temporalities but actively constructs the conditions through which they can be experienced. In a context of accelerating environmental change, these strategies contribute to expanding human understanding by making otherwise imperceptible processes accessible. At the same time, they foreground the limits of perception, situating human experience within a much larger temporal and spatial framework. In doing so, they not only facilitate engagement with non-human time, but also reposition the scale of human existence in relation to it. These strategies operate not only at the level of perception, but also as tools for orientation, allowing viewers to situate themselves within temporal structures that exceed human scale (Figure 9). Through material and participatory mediation, they enable engagement with phenomena that cannot be directly perceived. In the context of current ecological conditions, this becomes increasingly significant. They do not simply represent temporal processes but reshape how they are experienced.

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*“Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us...  
...on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.” (Sagan, 1997, p.12)*

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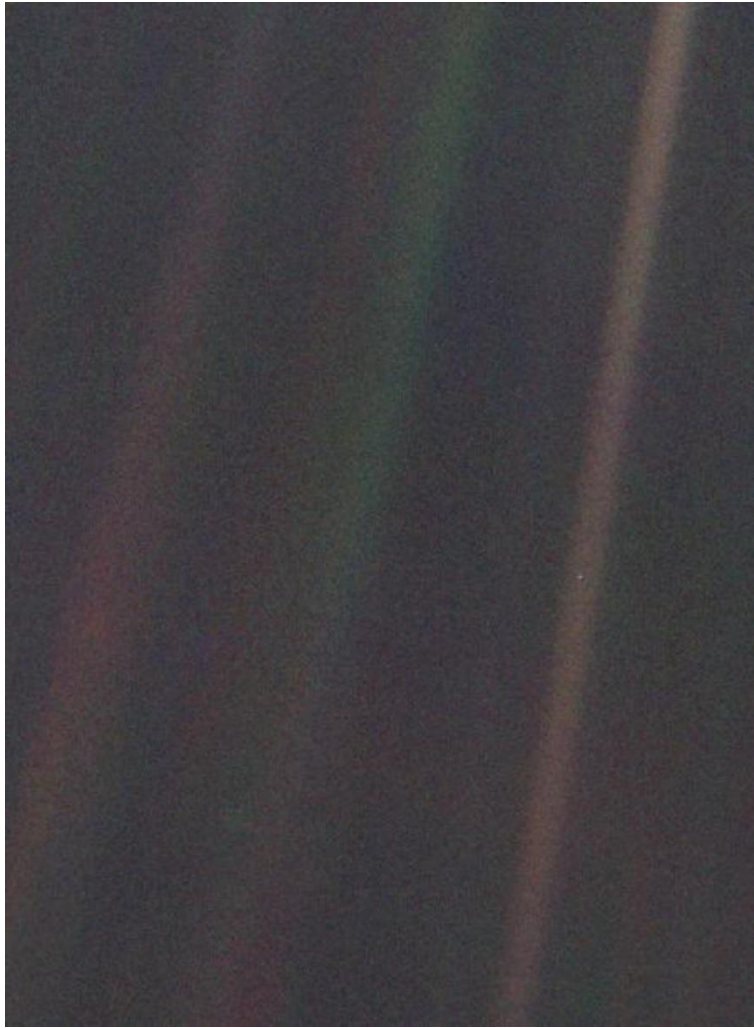


**Figure 9.** *Pale Blue Dot*, photograph of Earth taken by Voyager 1 (NASA/JPL, 1990).

## Figures

**Figure 1.** Katie Paterson, *Requiem* (2022), installation view showing glass vials and central urn. Available at: <https://katiepaterson.org/artwork/requiem/> (Accessed: 29 April 2026).

**Figure 2.** Katie Paterson, *Requiem* (2022), detail of glass vials containing powdered materials. Available at: <https://katiepaterson.org/artwork/requiem/> (Accessed: 29 April 2026).

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**Figure 9.** NASA/JPL (1990) *Pale Blue Dot*, Voyager 1 photograph of Earth. Available at: <https://www.planetary.org/space-images/the-pale-blue-dot-of-earth> (Accessed: 29 April 2026).

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