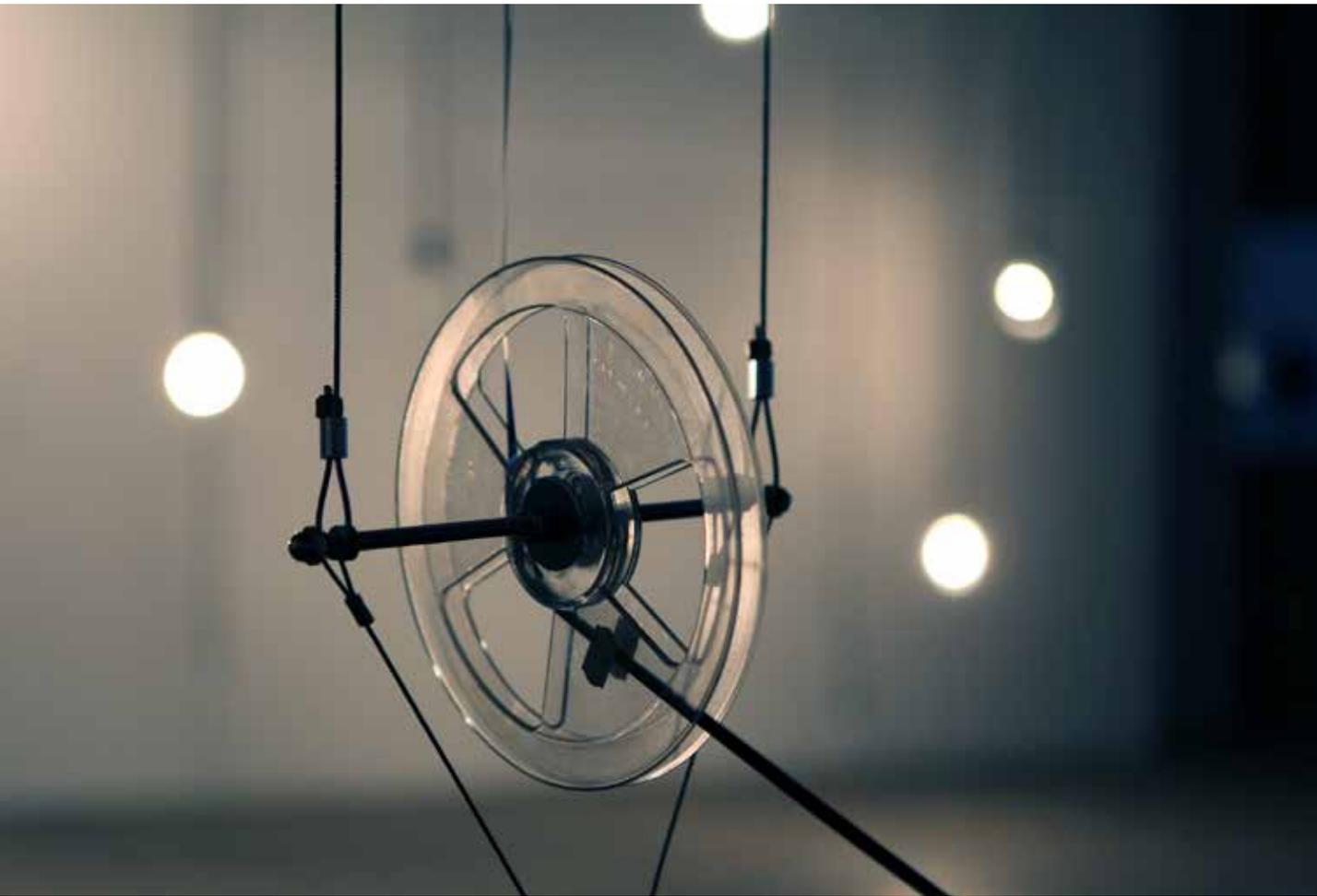


# Fiona Annis

The stars are dead  
but their light lives on



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Photography

# The stars are dead but their light lives on

by Nives Hajdin

“Because dated apparatuses are tangible manifestations of an intangible era, they can be associated with the phenomena of specters: ghostly manifestations that give presence to the past.”

—Fiona Annis

Since Sir John F. W. Herschel’s experimental advancements in the field of photography beginning in 1839, the medium has drastically shifted into the realm of the digital, rendering certain alchemical processes obsolete. Yet, these latter obscure technologies are of great interest to Glasgow-born, Montreal-based artist Fiona Annis. Her study of historical photographic processes catalyzed her analysis of the medium in relation to alchemy and astronomy, informing her latest solo exhibition, *The stars are dead but their light lives*



*Matter imprinted with its echo (Plate no. 3)*, one of six 30 x 61 cm engraved anodized aluminum plates, 2013

*on*. Realized during an artist residency at Eastern Bloc in Montreal, the exhibition presents the relationship between the finite and infinite, referencing antiquated photographic techniques to reify the fleeting after-images and distant echoes of dead stars.

Annis’s musings on the ethereal status of photography derive from her time-based experimentations, and her attempts to render tangible a time and place that are beyond our grasp. *The stars are dead but their light lives on* provides a glimpse into the inaccessible celestial territory that envelops our world, recreating the sights and sounds of dying stars and supernovas as they continually explode throughout the galaxy second by second, leaving us with mere after-images of an event millions of light years into the past. Time is a recurring theme for Annis, both within her larger practice as she explores the evolution of photography, as well as in this exhibition’s study of celestial matter that expands and contracts, pulses and dwindles, lives and dies. The four works in the exhibition comprise a unique final product; while some seemingly stand alone, others belong to a larger, immersive environment.

A single room blanketed in an interstellar aura, *Untitled Symphony (SN 1987A)* (2014) features a commanding installation of a hundred light bulbs that hang from the ceiling at various heights and flicker sporadically according to data processing that is tracking the death throes of large, transient stars. The lights flash on and off with a beating pulse, throbbing to the eerie white noise from an accompanying audio installation, *There is music in the spacing of the spheres* (2013). Three reel-to-reel tape machines on steady



*Star Machine (Halley's Passing)*, antique magneto-powered lightbox with photographic plate from Observatory archive (1910), 2014

loop encircle the hanging bulbs, emitting a sonic interpretation of these same dying stars that Annis has gathered from various databases throughout her research. The combined experience is both soothing and unsettling, charting the short-lived beauty between life and death. Over time, the tape erodes and the sound quality deteriorates, in line with the ephemeral nature of the exhibition. The union of light and sound exists as the central framework of the exhibition and yet, Annis's inclusion of additional works accentuates the interplay of light, time and optics that drive her fascination with lens-based technologies.

The 1910 passage of Halley's comet signifies one such phenomenon, as it resulted in the very first photographic documentation of a comet's approach towards the earth. The passage was also unique in that the earth passed through the comet's tail, thereby providing astronomers with a rare opportunity to gather spectroscopic data and study the relationship between radiated energy and matter. Despite the recurrence of the comet every 76 years, the discovery of lethal gases in the comet's tail also caused massive hysteria of an impending apocalypse, although the gas was not dense enough to be truly lethal. Annis is intrigued by the potential for "an oddly predictable rhythmic trajectory [to] repeatedly cause havoc,"<sup>1</sup> and *Star-Machine (Halley's Passing)* (2014) demonstrates the potentially destructive forces of celestial bodies. Annis utilizes an observatory's archival photographic plates of the 1910 passage to create an installation hinged on the participation of the viewer to set it into action. The photograph of the comet is only viewable by manually cranking an antique magneto-powered lightbox

that produces an electric current to illuminate the glass plate. Annis locates traces of the past, attempting to reawaken these photographic records, and yet the remnants remain within the domain of prior histories. The piece takes its inspiration from Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*, in which he muses, "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."<sup>2</sup>

The final work, *Matter imprinted with its echo (Plates 1-6)* (2013), again plays with notions of the fixity of time, light, and matter, simultaneously stable and in flux. Annis engraves reflective, black aluminum plates with excerpts from Jeanette Winterson's physics-inspired fiction, *Gut Symmetries*. The quotes pertaining to the infinity of light, ironically interrogate and contradict one's existence as a fixed object, as the viewer considers his or her reflection on the mirrored surface. Winterson's novel references Einstein's "grand unified theory" which proposes that at high energies separate forces can be merged into one force, and each individual plate – with the elusiveness of its quoted text and the gaping blackness of the aluminum – compounds into a larger contemplation of one's own mortality as matter governed by time.

Annis's exploration of obsolete photographic techniques informs her work in a variety of media beyond photography, unlocking visual secrets that might otherwise be lost. *The stars are dead but their light lives on* is a manifestation of Annis's continued curiosity in the way the past inhabits the present and her interest in remnants that are left behind, only to be rediscovered.

1 The author in conversation with Fiona Annis on October 18, 2014.

2 Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, eds., "On the Concept of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

## Cover image

*The stars are dead but their light lives on*, installation view at Eastern Bloc, 2013  
production residency film stills, 2014

## Poster image

*The stars are dead but their light lives on*, installation view at Eastern Bloc, 2013  
production residency film stills, 2014



*Halley's Passing (1910)*, large format enlargements of salvaged glass-plate positives from unknown observatory, 2013

Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing artform. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs, Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

**Fiona Annis** is a Montréal-based visual artist and researcher whose practice emphasizes the use of scores and time-based media. Fiona has presented her work at The AC Institute (New York City), The Canadian Centre for Architecture (Montréal) Goldsmith's University (London), LowSalt Gallery (Glasgow), and The Art Gallery of Alberta (Edmonton). Her work has been published in *BlackFlash Magazine*, *Front: Contemporary Art & Ideas*, and *Imagining Science*, winner of the New York Book Show Award. Fiona recently completed a six-month residency at The Center for Alternative Photography in New York City, and currently teaches at Concordia University.

**Nives Hajdin** is a Toronto-based art writer and curator. She holds an MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice from OCAD University. Her thesis examined the effects of social surveillance in contemporary society, and her curatorial interests include urban interventions in alternative public spaces. Her writing has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, and publications for Xpace Cultural Centre and Waddington's Auctioneers and Appraisers. She has an upcoming publication in *The Journal of Curatorial Studies* and was the Publication Coordinator for Luis Jacob's anthology, *Commerce by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 2011).

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