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2114, *Future Library*: A Conversation with Katie Paterson

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The completion of *Future Library* is 97 years away. *Future Library* is an artwork conceived by the Scottish artist Katie Paterson (born 1981), who explores time-related phenomenon and paradoxes, in such a way that she has been compared to Italo Calvino for his *Cosmicomics* [*Cosmicomiche*].

Future Library started in 2014 with the planting of 1000 Norwegian Spruce trees in a wood near Oslo, which in 2114 will provide the paper to print an anthology of 100 books, written and penned year-after-year—starting from 2014—by invited authors.

So far the Canadian author Margaret Atwood and the English writer David Mitchell have accepted the invitation, and handed a manuscript that—by contract—will be hidden for a century. This is the dream or the nightmare of every writer, as remarked by Alison Flood on the *Guardian*.¹ The project is visionary and optimistic; it is an immaterial cathedral that, instead of extending vertically, is expanding

¹ See 'Il semaforo di Maria Teresa Carbone,' *Alfabeta2*, 7 September 2014, <https://www.alfabeta2.it/2014/09/07/semaforo-maria-teresa-carbone/>; Alison Flood, 'Margaret Atwood's new work will remain unseen for a century', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/05/margaret-atwood-new-work-unseen-century-future-library>.

horizontally, along a timeline that exceeds the life expectation of those who are designing it.

In the meantime, a network of people, actions and decisions have been set in motion: the foresters who check the growth of the trees, the City of Oslo, the commissioners, the sponsors, the Library conservators who ensure the safety of the manuscripts, the computer technician who will migrate the text files to new formats, the Trustees who supervise the project, the webmasters who will update the website year-after-year, the organizers of the annual handover ceremony, in the middle of Nordic Spring. In 2017, the ceremony was held on 2nd June with the handover of the manuscript by the Icelandic author Sjón (pen name of Sigurjón Birgir Sigurðsson).

At this moment, a thousand certificates (printed on the paper obtained from the trees cut to host the new forest) are on sale in small sets not only to help fund the project but also to root it in the following generations. The artist imagines that the certificate—a tangible graphic artwork—can be purchased by private individuals who will leave it to their heirs, who will then be able to trade it in 2114 for a copy of the printed manuscript.

It is an investment in the future, in all senses. But also in us, who will become the past. Inevitable questions emerging today— What will will books be like in 100 years? Will the languages in which the books are written be fully understandable then? — correspond to mutual ones in the future: which fractures, which continuity, which karst evolutions will shape (and change) this artwork from today to 2114?

On 30th March 2017, the artist Katie Paterson replied to some of our questions about *Future Library*.

LL & AS: *Future Library* engages with concepts of memory, legacy and gift. What is the message that you are “enclosing” in this specially designed wooden room at the New Deichmanske Library in Oslo, which will act ultimately as a time-capsule?

KP: There are a number of elements in *Future Library*. In 2014 we first planted the forest, 1000 trees, which should make—we hope—around 3000 anthologies in the future; this is depending on the length of the texts, which is currently unknown. (The authors are not given any word count. They can write any number of words, any style, any content...) The forest is just outside the city of Oslo. Visitors can take a train to the outskirts of the city and then hike for about 30-40 minutes, and they are inside the *Future Library* forest. People can visit it and witness the trees slowly growing over the years.

There are many elements: there is the forest itself and there are the writers. We are commissioning one writer each year for 100 years to write anything they please. The texts enter the *Future Library*, and they will be printed on the paper made from the trees when they will be fully grown and cut in 100 years. There is the forest, the writers, the texts, the pulp and the paper, and there is a Silent Room in the New Deichmanske Library in Oslo. The library is going to be built in 2020, and we are using the trees that we cut to make space for the new forest to line the room where the manuscripts are going to be kept for one hundred years.

There many elements and it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the artwork lies. In terms of message, the word gift resonates because I like to think that it is an artwork not only for us now. It is an artwork that exists for a future generation, one that we

don't know, that it is difficult even to imagine, many of whom who are unborn—including the authors.

There are a lot of unknowns; there is a lot of unpredictability. *Future Library* is embracing the concept of time, of long, slow time; it is an artwork that evolves in an organic way and is not fixed to space or time. It relies on trust from a lot of people. It relies on the hope that the project will make it to 100 years. It is difficult even to image the landscape and the climate in Norway and the people 97 years from now.

LL & AS: In *Future Library* the Trust plays a key role in selecting the authors and looking over the project. It is a labor of trust and a labor of love. How is the Trust composed today, and who will be part of it in the future?

KP: The Trust is key to the project. The idea of *Future Library* began for me several years ago, and then the commissioner Bjørvika Utvikling got involved. A huge strength of the project is the Director Anne Beate Hovind. She has such incredible vision. Together we worked out how to develop the project “brick by brick.” Step one was finding the forest, getting the City of Oslo involved, and then working with the foresters. I have always had authors in my mind to invite, but I realized I had a gap in my knowledge and experience in the world of literature, and we realized we needed a group of people to contribute their ideas. The Future Library Trust is mostly publishers from the UK and Norway, and myself. It will change in the years to come. At the moment we are looking for a new member who has deeper knowledge of other areas of the world: non-English/Norwegian languages. We hope that the project encompasses many different languages and cultures, established and younger authors.

This year's author, Sjón, is the first non-English voice. He will be writing in Icelandic. He says that one of his concerns is if the language will exist in 100 years and people will be able to read what he has written in the current contemporary Icelandic. It is an interesting question of the extinction of languages and how they will be read and survive...

LL & AS: The annual handover ceremonies look to be a fundamental milestone in this equation. How are they celebrated today, and what do you expect in the future? What kind of response/involvement came from the local communities?

KP: At the moment the handover ceremony has happened at the end of Spring. This year [at the time of the interview] it is on the 2nd June 2017. This ritual happens every year: the key part of it is the author bringing their manuscript to the forest. I envisioned it as an intimate gathering: people meet at the station, and we all walk together, we make a fire, serve coffee. The authors give a reading of their choosing (not the manuscript, of course). In the first year Margaret Atwood read from one of her previous works. Last year, David Mitchell read from Philip Larkin's *The Trees*. The manuscript is handed over to the mayor, who is responsible for depositing it in the City Archive where it is locked away till the Room is ready. We are asking authors for their input: David Mitchell wanted a choir to sing in the forest. It was quite magical. This year there will be a harpist.

LL & AS: How have you planned/designed the final ceremony and the last phases of the project?

KS: I won't be around (Laugh). It is a kind of beautiful idea. The deeper you get into the project, it is more likely that the later authors will be around for the reception of their books. It is quite different to think about the last 10-20 years of the project. We need to start planning ahead for the design of the book too, and how the paper will be pulped and printed. We are looking to get hold of a physical printing press and teach people how to print books, just in case that is not a possibility in the future.

LL & AS: In which medium are the manuscripts deposited (file, paper)? Do you think that in the future books will be available?

KS: The author submits a hard copy and a digital file. The Trust is responsible for updating the file in the latest formats. We get advice from Oslo's City Archive on how to undertake this process, so that the file exists safely but doesn't leak anywhere.

Ultimately, the printed manuscript is the most important document. The manuscripts are printed in archival ink and paper, and they will be kept safe and secure in a special room that we are designing for the top floor of the library, with the special collections. We ask the authors to destroy everything else related to their text: the paper manuscript and the file are the only existing traces.

There will be conservators to hand, as the manuscripts will be held within the library, with controlled temperature and humidity and light. It is the ideal place. Books generally survive long expanses of time, but we are looking into making the texts archival quality so no words are destroyed. It is a learning curve: we are writing this book together.

LL & AS: *Future Library* evokes Joseph Beuys' *7000 oak trees* for Kassel

Documenta in 1982. In the age of global warming and environmental emergency, what is the meaning for you today of planting a breathing and living artwork?

KP: It is important to me that *Future Library* is a statement of hope. It is quite a small gesture, a small forest within this larger forest. Yet it is a symbol that this forest will last for the next 100 years when we are in a moment in which the planet seems to be headed to a destructive end. I am hopeful but I am also a realist. Norway has a futuristic long-term view of climate change and environment: this was one of the key reasons to create this project there. The forest is protected under Norwegian law: the city cannot encroach any further into the forest.

There is a term that I heard recently, Cathedral Thinking: large-scale, long-term thinking. People used to think in longer time spans; it is pertinent at the moment as the time-span people live by is reduced and reduced. It is important to me that *Future Library* lives in a slow time span, to think of the future and question the decades to come.

LL & AS: *Future Library* has in common with the building of a cathedral, this collective dimension, shared authorship...

KP: Absolutely. *Future Library* has something of a collective authorship: there are the voices of the authors, the foresters, the librarians, the conservators, all the people involved at the handover ceremonies. In some ways, the entire City is getting

involved. The people of Oslo take ownership of the project—because it is theirs. Over the years, more and more people are getting involved thanks also to the Deichmanske Library's influence. After the handover event, we have a public talk with the author at the library. The audience is not only literary; we are reaching a wider audience.

LL & AS: Which type of trees are you planting?

We planted Norwegian Spruce trees. We chose that tree type because it is the most natural tree for that landscape. If some trees die, they will regenerate from seed.

Remarkably, the forest is so high tech—the City of Oslo's foresters have a computer system to check the progress of each tree.

LL & AS: Who is supporting and sponsoring the project?

The main supporter is Bjørvika Utvikling; they are the commissioners. They are commissioning artworks for the harbor area (called Bjørvika), a site that is undergoing regeneration and change. *Future Library* is an artwork that was commissioned for Bjørvika, and that is where the new library and manuscript room will be. BU have funded most of the project; other funding will be sourced in the future. The City gifted us the forest.

LL & AS: The core of the project—the manuscript—will be secret, hidden from everybody, except for their author for the remaining time of the project. In *With Hidden Noise* (1916), Duchamp asked his friend Walter Arensberg to place an object in a ball of twine. As in that case, you won't know what is at the very core of this shared authorship/collective artwork. How do you feel personally about this particular aspect? Is it a form of meditation?

KS: For me it is the heart of the project, that it is a hidden secret. The authors have to keep it to themselves; they are not allowed to share their text or distribute it anywhere else. We do allow them to have an editor if it is part of their writing process. But the number of eyes that have seen the text is very limited.

A lot of people ask me if I am desperate to read the texts: of course a part of me would love to read them, but I would never do it. I think it is a form of meditation and I feel so comfortable with the fact that I will never read them. It is not an instant gratification, as is very popular in our culture, where so many things are on demand. I like to accept that a huge span of time has to pass before someone can open the first page. And I have no idea or concept of who that first reader might be. So yes, it is quite a meditation on time.

LL & AS: How do you imagine 2114? How do you think this project will be looked at then?

KP: I have to admit I find difficult to truly picture how that world will be. One hundred years ago who could have imagined and predicted what the world looks like today? What I find most difficult to imagine is humanity. The forest of course feels timeless. In the forest you feel like it could be any year, and I like that feeling. I hope the forest is the same and the trees will be fully grown. I hope there will be an audience ready to receive the anthology.

LL & AS: Will the book be on sale?

KP: I made certificates printed on the paper from the trees cut to plant the new forest. People can buy them now; they are graphic artworks. They will be passed down within families from generation to generation and bought by museums and libraries, and will be switched over for a full *Future Library* anthology in the year 2114. The sale of the certificates helps fund the project. There are 1000 certificates that we are making available over the years, decade by decade. This leaves 2000 full anthologies in the years to come, and I imagine they will be for sale.

LL & AS: It is beautiful to think that these certificates will be transmitted as part of a family heritage.

KP: Yes, it is part of the legacy of passing it to the next generation.

LL & AS: For those who cannot go to Oslo, they can access the project through the website. On the *Future Library* website there is a time-line that can be explored and navigated by the visitor. Do you think that people might want to create their own lists of authors and titles in the future? Who is the author of the soundscape in the website?

KP: We have just developed a new website, that was launched some weeks ago: www.futurelibrary.no. It was an interesting process, imagining a digital field that goes on and on. We developed it with 96 empty tree rings to fill with information year by year: the website, like the artwork, won't be complete for a century. We have made interviews with each author, films of the handover events, there is a lot of information there, and press clippings to read. It is a information center but also an experiential

website. We commissioned the sound designer, Adam Asnan, to create an immersive sound scape.

LL & AS: It feels like a soundscape...

KP: Yes, it is. You can zoom in and out of the tree rings and get a feeling of the years; you can travel through time.

LL & AS: The forest will be the first edition of the books, but then there could be a second edition.

KP: This might be a possibility, but it is out of our hands. Maybe they will be e-books, or something beyond our current vision. Or maybe printed books on paper will be strong as ever. It is left to the hands of the future.

This interview appeared for the first time in an edited Italian version on *Alfabeta2* on 23rd April 2017 (Laura Leuzzi, Antonella Sbrilli, “2114, la biblioteca del futuro. Una conversazione con Katie Paterson,” *Alfabeta2*, 23 April 2017, <https://www.alfabeta2.it/2017/04/23/2114-libri-sulla-fiducia-conversazione-katie-paterson/>).