

Forest site of Katie Paterson's *Future Library*, 2014–2114, Nordmarka, Oslo, March 6, 2014. Photo: Katie Paterson.

1000 WORDS

# Katie Paterson and Margaret Atwood

TALK ABOUT *FUTURE LIBRARY*, 2014–2114

**THE WORKS** of Katie Paterson go sailing off the scale of civilization. Using technologies normally applied to the speed and scope of human experience, the Scottish artist zooms out or tunnels in to other, more alien dimensions, reframing natural and cosmic phenomena. When she maps the approximately twenty-seven thousand dead stars that have been observed by humankind (*All the Dead Stars*, 2009) or chisels a grain of sand down to the size of dust and buries it in the Sahara (*Inside this desert lies the tiniest grain of sand*, 2010), anthropocentric worldviews are dissipated in favor of a different kind of consciousness, one keyed to evolutionary systems and rooted in contact with igneous chaos. Perhaps it is necessary to humble humankind in this way—denuding our imagination, subverting our reason—to bring a sense of discovery back to an era in which we are otherwise more likely to witness the disappearance of things rather than their emergence.

Yet even if our species might prove to be nothing but a blip in the long night of the universe, Paterson betrays hope for the short term. “You, at least, believe that the human race will still be around in a hundred years!” enthused the acclaimed writer and environmental activist Margaret Atwood when she was asked to be the first contributor to Paterson’s centennial project, *Future Library*, 2014–2114, a work of art that is essentially a form of time travel.

This spring, Paterson had an entirely new forest of one thousand fir sprigs planted outside of Oslo. These nascent trees are intended to provide paper for a book comprising texts to be commissioned over one hundred years—and kept unread until the compendium is published in 2114. Writers will be invited and announced on a year-to-year basis by the Future Library Trust, a committee that will itself change every ten years, and whose main responsibilities will be the

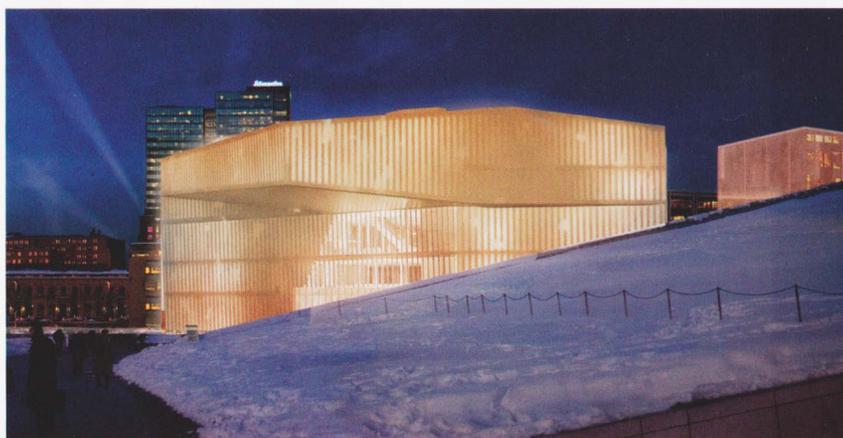
issuing of an annual invitation to a writer (such as Atwood), as well as ensuring the preservation of the forest and the texts over the coming century. Until the moment of their publication, the texts will be stored at the Norwegian capital’s new Deichmanske Bibliotek (Oslo Public Library, to be inaugurated in 2018), in a special room designed by Paterson in collaboration with Atelier Oslo and Lund Hagem Architects, who designed the building.

The chronopolitics of *Future Library* emphasizes the tension between the human life span and the life of the artwork. The closest literary precedent may be that of Percival Bartlebooth, the protagonist of Georges Perec’s novel *La vie mode d’emploi* (*Life: A User’s Manual*, 1978), who spends ten years studying the art of watercolor and another twenty traveling around the world, painting motifs from various ports. Returning from his journey, Bartlebooth turns his watercolors into five hundred 750-piece jigsaw puzzles, which he spends the next twenty years completing. He then has the jigsaws sent back to the places he created them to be washed free of pigment in the very port each depicts, leaving no trace behind. That, at least, is the way he plans it; Bartlebooth unexpectedly dies mid-puzzle. *Future Library* similarly inscribes itself into the lives of its authors and a particular cycle of creativity. But though the time span of this project goes up against the limits of human comprehension—many of the writers and certainly Paterson herself will be subject to biological *désœuvrement* before its end—the work will go on.

Paterson and Atwood met in Copenhagen this past August and talked about their journey into the unknown—a set of events that will exceed the world we now know.

—Lars Bang Larsen

Atelier Oslo and Lund Hagem  
Architects, Deichmanske  
Bibliotek (Oslo Public Library),  
anticipated completion 2018,  
Oslo. Rendering.



**“We have trees growing and budding, the library room is being built—but the future is a fabulation. Its readers and writers don’t exist yet.”**

**—Katie Paterson**

**KATIE PATERSON:** I had the idea for *Future Library* quite a while ago. At the time, it seemed like one of those works that would have to go into my volume of impossible ideas. I had a vision of tree rings as chapters in a book, growing imperceptibly over time, with tree trunks pulped into paper that would compress these years of growth into material stories. Written now, but for an entirely future time and place. And then on a trip to Norway, it became clear: This is the place! Oslo is literally surrounded by forest. The city seeps into that landscape and vice versa, and I thought, The forest must enter into people’s psyches in a different way here. Perhaps when the authors start writing for *Future Library*, by some strange osmosis their ideas are going to find themselves growing through the trees, like the air or water that feeds them. Year by year, the writers’ words form invisible chapters whose narratives will be reconstituted a century later, and experienced in yet another durational span by their as yet unborn readers.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** To be asked to contribute to *Future Library* took me right back to my childhood, when, like many children, I buried little things here and there, essentially making time capsules. You’re

communicating with somebody unknown in the future. This kind of leap across time is everywhere in sci-fi, of course. But the Dead Sea Scrolls, Egyptian coffin shards, and the Egyptian Book of the Dead are all fascinating examples of this, too. They tell us a lot. They are windows into the past, except that we never quite know how to transcribe them. We don’t know what they meant to the people who wrote them, so we’re always guessing.

**KP:** *Future Library* is a speculative fiction. We have no idea if the forest is going to exist in one hundred years. What will be extinct? What will live there? The new Oslo Deichmanske Library is trying to project itself into the future and imagine what kind of institution it will be. Right now, we have trees growing and budding, the library room is being built—but the future is a fabulation. Its readers and writers don’t exist yet. Then there’s a point where I will die, of course. Somebody pointed out that Norway might not be a country by then. We really cannot predict. And Margaret has put it into my mind that maybe humanity won’t even exist!

Yet one hundred years isn’t that far away. It’s on the brink of things we *can* imagine, and things that are being constructed now that will inform that time. For the foresters with whom we collaborate, one hundred years is a natural time frame in which to think, so they don’t blink an eye when we talk about growing this forest a century on out. But it’s also far enough away that we could be completely dumbfounded. One hundred years could feel like one thousand. In a way, the human scale might feel absolutely minute in the face of this vastness—but it’s also part of it. We shouldn’t be scared of extreme time. I tried to imply this in my *Fossil Necklace* [2013]. The fossils in the work are very, very fragile, even though they have survived for 3.5 billion years or more. It’s quite a—dare I say it—beautiful object to look at. But there’s so much darkness embodied in the necklace because it charts the extinction of life throughout history. It’s

not about progress at all, either—that’s something I was trying to get away from. It’s death on a string but also, hopefully, a leap into the future—and in that future, will the idea of a fossil itself be a fossil?

**MA:** You can’t predict the vagaries of style. What one age considers revolutionary, the next age may consider kitsch. Something can go through a cycle of being considered wonderful art, and then it can go through a period of being really sneered upon—after which it can come back into vogue again. Literary fashion and biological change are all subject to this. The reception of *Future Library* in 2114 will depend on these cycles of style; we just don’t know.

**KP:** I once visited the Ise Shinto shrine [in Japan]. There is little physical to look at, really, because it’s believed rocks and trees are mere vehicles for spirit. The shrines have a blank square on the ground next to them, and every twenty years the priests rebuild the shrine in exactly the same form. And they’ve been doing this for more than one thousand years—the building is that old, but it’s continually refreshed and remade. I fell in love with this incredible thought. And the lumber for the shrine’s construction comes from trees grown on a sacred mountain. I wanted *Future Library* to have something of this material transformation and transience.

A lot of my ideas are very stark. Maybe this comes from the idea of the Zen koan, a riddle in the form of a short expression that’s there to help your mind take a leap into an irrational way of thinking. I look for both words and images—narratives and diagrams—that might allow that kind of leap. A map of all the dead stars in the universe—where does that lead you? **MA:** *Future Library* isn’t just a visual art project. It’s a literary art project. Katie is the form, and I’m the content. So the visual part of it is the forest and the recording of the forest and the placing of the things within the library. As a score for all the texts to be written it is very much a John Cage structure: one note a year for the next hundred years. □

Tree planting for Katie Paterson’s *Future Library*, 2014–2114, Nordmarka, Oslo, May 20, 2014. Photo: MJC.

