Scottish artist Katie Paterson sees straight through obstacles when creating her work. She produces these profoundly rich ambitious projects, such as The Future Library and the Fossil Necklace (above), leaving you feeling reflective yet enthralled. Her work explores the relationship between the foundations of our universe and the future of humanity.

Her most acclaimed project is The Future Library, which is basically a public artwork that aims to collect one original story by a popular writer every year until 2114. Its inaugural author is none other than superstar author Margaret Atwood, whom recently handed in her novel shrouded in secrecy. If it all seems a bit sci-fi, that's because it kind of is. In light of her recently being nominated for the 2016 PIAC – Prix International d’Art Contemporain, we got together with Katie to talk about her symbolic work and aim to find out what resides in that very creative mind of hers.
Let’s talk about your most recent project, Future Library, an extremely audacious one – one which many artists probably can only dream of undertaking. As we understand it, there is a forest just outside Oslo, Norway that will be used to print a number books in one hundred years time. Leading up to that, one writer every year will contribute a text, with the writings held in trust, unpublished, until 2114. That first writer being Margaret Atwood. Can you tell us a little about how this came about and why you decided to pursue such a project?

Future Library is my most ambitious artwork to date. For me it is dream-like, I take a step back sometimes and it doesn’t quite feel real; it has qualities of an illusion, a day-dream. On May 26th this year we will take a public walk through the Future Library Forest with Margaret Atwood, where she will give a reading, announce the title of her manuscript that will be hidden away, and we will be served tea around a camp fire made by the foresters. I’m sure there will be a dream-like feel to the day.

The project came about several years ago. I was very happy to be approached by Bjørvika Utvikling to work on a commission for Slow Space, a series of public artworks for Oslo’s harbour area. Norway felt like the perfect place for Future Library to exist and grow. Being covered by forest, with the city surrounded by trees, I imagined the forest may be part of people’s psyches in a more pronounced way. Perhaps a 100-year artwork might be received and thought about differently. Then, with Norway’s historical and contemporary literary connections, the connection with the new library and the forward looking views on nature and environment, everything fell together. At that stage it didn’t fully occur to me that I was embarking on an artwork that I would nurture for my entire life.
The well-known writer Margaret Atwood said of the project “The Future Library project goes right back to that phase of our childhood when we used to bury little things in the backyard, hoping that someone would dig them up long in the future.” There is definitely a sense of wonderment to this project. Is that what you were trying to manifest?

If Future Library enables a feeling of wonder, that makes me very happy indeed. However, I’ve found that trying to manifest any particular response from the outset of creating an artwork, backfires. Generally my works aren’t intended to provoke a particular response, but function more like a butterfly effect; beginning like a wave and rippling out quietly. My own creative processes are similar. Ideas come, often through a process of writing, images appearing clearly, in what feels like milliseconds. The idea is discrete, described in a few words. The idea for Future Library happened in one of these microseconds where notions of time, growth, future, place, stories, pulp, matter, cells, smells, all collapsed into one.

**Your work shows a true interconnectedness with nature. With relation to The Future Library, you’ve said, “...their growth [trees] will contain ideas of authors. Tree rings like chapters in a book.” Do you think we take this relationship with nature for granted?**

Nature plays a crucial part in all of my artworks; whether that’s trees, forests, fossils, oceans, stars, galaxies, the moon, rocks, sand, meteorites... hopefully it’s inseparable. For me, the simple idea that trees-make-books is taken a little for granted. Future Library is a simple idea in its essence – growing a book for the future. A new project I’m working on in Bristol, with architect duo Zeller and Moye, involves an immensity of tree species. We are sourcing literally thousands of types of tree samples from every corner of the globe, through time and space. Though trees are so ubiquitous, perhaps we take for granted their great diversity and our absolute reliance on them to live.
Margaret Atwood is such a big coup for this project, how did it come about?

Yes! I am absolutely overjoyed and honoured that Margaret Atwood is the first writer for Future Library. We invited her immediately from the outset. She is an extraordinary, visionary author – one of the world’s greatest living authors. Her work over the decades has been so incredibly varied; feminist stories, crime fiction, spy thrillers, gothic romance, speculative fiction. She explores the consequences of technology, human induced apocalypse, environmental disasters, sustainability, survival, extinction, the future of our species, the interrelations between human beings and the natural world. Margaret Atwood was invited to write for Future Library for these reasons. She is incredibly perceptive, continually writing about prescient subjects and her work speaks across generations, across time. She writes about time and catapults her readers to a future time and place, projecting unsettling, strange, dystopian worlds. Her work has so much to say about our lives now and the futures we are building as a species. Never mind the forest itself surviving, Margaret Atwood asks, “Will human beings survive the 21st century?”

You’ve said, “My work as a whole considers our place on Earth in the context of geological time and change”. What do you mean, specifically, with that statement?

It’s difficult to express what my work encompasses succinctly, as it changes so often – from day to day as well as year to year. The tie between my works is the human being, and how we relate and interconnect with the wider planet and cosmos – collapsing time and distance – the near and the far – here and the future. Considering our place on earth amidst the flow of time and the movement of the earth, the growth of the forests, deep time, cosmic time.
Berlin, I can never seem to settle in only one place at a time! My practice relies on a combination of solitude and communication, speed and slowness. Living between both places, with a mix of traveling in between, allows for this.

Your work often deals with nature and science. We are slowly realising we have a very fragile relationship within that ecosystem. Specifically, the environment. What are your thoughts on that particular area? Are you concerned for humanity at this point, does any of your work perhaps allude to a warning of some sort?

I don’t want to be didactic with my artwork, however, works like Future Library do question the path of humanity and what the planet – the forest, Oslo, civilisation – may encompass in one century’s time. Margaret Atwood questions whether human beings will even exist in 100 years. Works like Fossil Necklace [a necklace of carved fossils sewn on era by era] have a dark side; the necklace encompasses life and the extinction of life over billions of years. Also, the migration of human beings across the globe and the path of destruction that followed. However, works like All the Dead Stars make a connection between the million-year distance of a star exploding and its elements running through our blood... not as distant as it seems.

In its essence, Future Library is hopeful – it believes there will be a forest, a book, and a reader in 100 years. The choices of this generation will shape the centuries to come, perhaps in an unprecedented way. Inside the forest time stands still. This place could have existed for one hundred, one thousand, one million, or even one hundred million years. I take comfort in the natural processes that have unfolded over such enormous expanses of time – imagining the plethora of living beings that have evolved in its ecosystem. The earth itself has a predicted lifespan of another few billion years, and there are millions of other planets and galaxies. Life in this universe will continue to exist.
We talk a lot about technology at the moment; its context in society, how it will affect our lives. Your work deals a lot with technology, but in this bizarre contrast of the very ancient and modern. Would you agree, what do you personally think technology will be like in 100 years from now?

Yes, my work contrasts between the very ancient – billion year old fossils, extremely distant darkness, the antique moon and so on – and modern technology, such as radios and record players, mobile phones and digital pianos, Apps, advanced telescopes looking back through the universe, and radio messages decoded via the moon. The technology in Future Library is simply the book, and the ability to pulp paper from trees.
It’s impossible for me to say how technology will have advanced in 100 years, though I do think it is merging more and more seamlessly with the human being and it will progressively do so more and more. Looking back 100 years, who could have predicted the sea-changes in 1915. Technologies advance faster than ever now. How do we conceptualise and think about these changes as they overtake us? I hope the writings in the Future Library Anthology will contain crystallised moments from this era to the next. Each piece of writing will hold within it something of its own time, own moment, projected into an unknown future.

Your work was eloquently described as, “transporting you from the micro to the macro in a heartbeat”. Following on from that, I feel as though your work has a microcosm of profoundness. What I mean by that is you can pack such a punch with such a simple idea, like the 27,000 Dead Stars, Fossil Necklace and Future Library. Would you agree?

Thank you! I try to use Occam’s Razor. Or rather, I try to not let ideas get through that I can’t express in a few words. It takes time, effort and a lot of crafting and editing to achieve clarity. I am working on a book, 150 Ideas, at present; works to exist in the imagination, expressed almost like haikus. This takes the simplicity to another level still.

You undertake a huge amount of research and preparation with your artwork – the making of it all, the production, the admin, everything that’s involved. If you had an unlimited budget, what would your next project likely entail?
That makes me smile. Out of the 150 Ideas? How about all of them? That’s a difficult question as many of my ideas are on the brink of being impossible – even if there was an unlimited budget – involving Saturn’s rings, other planets skies... I would like to create this idea: an ice rink, composed of all the glaciers in the world. I would collect a small sample from each and every glacier, and bring it together in one ice rink; a miniature planet-o-sphere. This is possible, just difficult, time consuming, impractical and expensive – what a surprise! But, if I was held back by these constraints, none of my projects would have come to fruition so far.

THE INSIGHT: If you had an unlimited budget, what would your next project likely entail? KATIE PATERSON: ...I would like to create this idea: an ice rink, composed of all the glaciers in the world.

I’m interested to know what music you enjoy, could you list some of your favourite artists or pieces of music?

It varies. Classical nocturnes to electronic music, experimental, sometimes jazz... Icelandic influences. I like Haco. And I’ve just bought One Hundred Years Old Rain (the Same River Twice) by Okkyung Lee.
I was recently reading about an amateur astronomer, Robert Evans, in the book, A Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson. He is a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia and an amateur astronomer who holds the record for visual discoveries of supernovae. Are you aware of this incredible story, especially after your work, 27,000 Dead Stars? Do you find the enormity of our universe daunting but also a muse inspiring your work?

I am not aware of Robert Evans’ work, thank you. His discoveries are bound to be documented in my map! Do I find the universe daunting? Absolutely, but that’s the appeal in my work, to have a sense of bringing it closer, less abstract and less something ‘out there’ but ‘in here’ that we are inseparable from. I am not scared of deep space; I’m drawn in, and I want to feel the interrelations between a far-away star and ourselves; get a little closer to grasping infinitude and gain a deeper understanding – even if in a kaleidoscopic, fragmented way.

1 Silver Pavilion Temple, Japan

Zen gardens, temples, shrines, the moon over Ginkaku-ji

2 Italo Calvino - Invisible Cities

I want to live in all of them.