

A New Spring

by Arve Rød

I can hear the sound of melting snow and ice. I'm not talking about the great ice, the ice cap over Greenland, or the icebergs that break free from the Antarctic like small continents. This ice is melting in the street where I live after an all too early Spring has arrived in February. A warmth has come that has made the streets of Oslo bare and the grass nearly green when it should be frozen hard until mid-March.

The sound of melting ice was always a sound of optimistic expectation. Small wet splashes reminded us that below the snow life still existed. Is that still not so? Does an early Spring still not give a pang of joy and relief that the dark days are finally over?

Of course it does. But if we believe what science tells us, and it seems there are few reasons not to, all the Springs to come will begin earlier. For future generations they will come even earlier still, until there is no ice left to melt in the streets. In one hundred years the forests and hills around Oslo could be green throughout the year. Maybe we will have to call up the ice to be reminded of its sound.

In 2007 the Scottish artist Katie Paterson allowed us to do just that. One of her artworks shown at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, consisted of a series of neon numbers on a wall: 07757001122. It appeared to be an artwork that followed a strict Conceptualist tradition: sparse, dense information conveyed as cryptic fragments of text (or in this case numbers), often in neon, that despite Conceptual Art's aesthetic frugality has been a preferred material of many of the movement's foremost proponents.

The significance of Paterson's series of numbers was neither linguistically ambiguous nor philosophically complex. The point was as simple as it was spectacular. The number was a telephone number, more specifically Paterson's own, and when you dialed it you heard the voice of a glacier in your ear. Inside the powerful but quickly melting Vatnajökull in Iceland, Europe's largest glacier, Paterson had placed an underwater microphone connected to her own mobile phone. You could dial her number and for a few moments linger over the sound of trickling and dripping glacial water.

Perhaps what was most sensational about the artwork, called *Vatnajökull (the sound of)*, was how undramatic the sound of the glacier was (if you're wondering what it sounds like, an extract of the sound recording is available on Paterson's website). When one imagines the sound of a glacier, it is that of a frozen and creaking mass of one hundred thousand tonnes breaking and shaping the landscape. Instead, with her work, Paterson gives us a melancholy picture of what the melting of the great ice actually sounds like: gentle murmurs, splashes and drops, subdued and beautiful. As we now know, this is a sound that might never cease until there is no ice and no glacier left.

It will take much longer than one hundred years before the last of Vatnajökull has flowed into the sea. In the interim much will have changed unrecognisably, not least our societies, and maybe even human beings themselves. We can't imagine how this future world might appear, lending Paterson's otherwise poetic work an instant drama. Catastrophe hides within beauty, or, as she has said herself about *Vatnajökull (the sound of)*: 'In a way there is something heartbreaking about this, knowing that you are listening to something magnificent being destroyed, but it is also very beautiful, a celebration of nature.'¹

Long before Vatnajökull disappears, the area of felled woodland in Nordmarka - the beautiful belt of forests that encircle Oslo - will be covered again with tall trees. Last year one thousand spruce saplings were planted there. Ninety-nine years from now the mature trees will be turned into paper to be used to print a book containing one hundred manuscripts by as many authors. Until then the original manuscripts will be sealed and archived in a special room in the Deichmanske Library being built in Bjørvika, Oslo, as part of Katie Paterson's project *Future Library*.

The first text has already been written and delivered by the internationally renowned Canadian author Margaret Atwood. Every year for the next ninety-nine years a new contribution will be made to the archive by a carefully chosen author. When the new library building is finished the manuscripts will be placed in sealed boxes in a specially designed 'silent room'. No adult living now will ever know what is inside the boxes, other than that they are texts of some kind in a material form that will both withstand the ravages of time and be technologically available in the year 2114.

One can imagine many obstacles to a work of art that spans such a long period. *Future Library*, as I interpret it, is a three-part project with a gradually more unpredictable outcome: an installation, a process, and a published anthology. The most concrete, and in a literal sense, the most palpable as

¹ *The Guardian*, 8. June 2007

a considered work of art, is the 'silent room' designed by Paterson in collaboration with the architects of the new library. When the challenging ground conditions in Bjørvika have been overcome, the library building will rise up with the 'silent room' and all its boxes inside. As in a Swiss bank vault, the author's name and the manuscript's title will be inscribed on each box encased in wood taken from trees that were cut down to make space for the spruce saplings that now grow amongst the heather in Vettakollen.

The 'silent room' will be an installation that can be considered as a "gesamtkunstwerk" as it unites visual art, architecture, design and literature. It may also be considered as a 'relational' work, in that the installation is not just an artistic object to behold, but a room to be used, a 'linking element' in the language of relational aesthetics, and a space for social experience. Paterson's *Future Library* will be an installation with a physical presence and design that is permanent and unchanging, but also a meeting place that will invite open and dynamic social processes.

Furthermore, there is a process that is ongoing over a long period of time, covering a large physical space. *Future Library* is a land art project that can be compared with the legendary German artist Joseph Beuys' planting of seven thousand oaks at Kassel in 1982. Beuys' tree planting also took a similar view of social and ecological thinking, the artist considering the trees as elements of nature's process of rebirth, and in that sense a kind of time capsule. In *Future Library* the inclusion of each authors' work will mirror the natural processes of growth in the forest, with the manuscripts being sealed each year in an equally slowly growing archive.

The end result is also an element of the artwork; when the last text has been written, and the fully grown spruce trees are felled, pulped, turned into paper and made into the final anthology for a future audience.

The different elements of the artwork are only partially controllable. The further out in time and into the forest we travel, the more uncertain the outcome. We don't know what we, that is to say our grandchildren and great grandchildren and great great grandchildren, will read when the boxes are opened and texts revealed in 2114. According to Margaret Atwood wild horses couldn't drag it out of her: 'It is a part of the contract that you can't say anything about what you've written'².

Maybe it will contain three lines of poetry, perhaps an article about the state of the world, or possibly an entire novel. Those of us living now will never know. Maybe its meaning will have

² *The Guardian*, 5. September 2014

changed when it comes to be read, because language is also impermanent and constantly changing. Maybe the newly planted trees in Nordmarka forest will have long burnt down in one of the murderously dry summers we will have in thirty or fifty or eighty years. The trees could certainly be replaced with others, but then part of the artistic concept would also disappear. Then again, maybe no one will take artistic concepts as seriously in one hundred years time.

What we may know something about is what *Future Library* means as an artistic contention today. Where Paterson's representation of Vatnajökull was poetic and beautiful in its apocalyptic vision, *Future Library* is, in the best sense, a utopian project, with a one hundred year perspective that insists on a belief in the future. And maybe that is exactly what we need right now, when news about the consequences of our lifestyles are hitting us daily: another animal species on the verge of extinction, another bacteria becoming immune to modern drugs, yet another piece of research telling us we are standing on the edge of an irrevocable ecological collapse. Those of us who grew up during the 1970s and 80s have experienced the pressing notion of our own annihilation with 'the bomb' as a constant threat (and it still is, we just no longer talk about it). That threat remained just a possibility, after all, the bomb never fell. However, for both young and old today the threat of this other Ragnarök³ is tied to something very real and present: to the processes going on around us, invisibly and quietly like the sound from the glacier's interior, that are altering the landscape and atmosphere and, just as the bomb did, invading our dreams of the future.

There is an idea in social psychology that says 'fake it until you become it'. So-called "power posing" means that our body language can affect how we think about ourselves. If you tighten your stomach muscles, lift your arms and behave as if you are strong, you will feel stronger, and as a consequence you will be stronger. At the same time there is research showing that awareness campaigns using doomsday warnings about climate change have a tendency to be counterproductive. We become less engaged by being repeatedly reminded of how bad things are. Denial and apathy swamp the impulse to act.

I don't know if the purpose of *Future Library* is to incite concrete action, but the project is at least meant to create and support an attitude. Paterson's work for me is an example of power posing in artistic form, without being insistent or moralising. *Future Library* is not a campaign to make a political point, but an invitation to feel the proximity of nature, to care for the forest and to be aware of life as it evolves, to see the relationship between the natural environment and man-made cityscapes and architecture, and to show confidence that those who will come after us will see the

³ The fiery destruction and fertile rebirth of the world, according to Norse mythology

worth in continuing the project's practical work and artistic content. *Future Library* also allows us to see our life in a temporal perspective that is simultaneously distant and near enough to sense the scale and seriousness of it within our lifespan. For the artist herself this is more than just an idea; Paterson is contractually bound to the project for the rest of her life.

Although it has only just started, for some *Future Library* is perhaps already a disappointment, because it doesn't allow one to see, or read, 'the result'. In this respect Paterson touches on a sensitive nerve: if in today's culture an initiative doesn't provide a final and instantly available result, then we don't see the point of it. But it is not about completion. For me the most important element of *Future Library* is already finished, in the form of a promise that in one hundred years time a new Spring will come. Whether it will remain is up to us.