

*The Time of an Artwork*

by Lisa Le Feuvre

What is the time of an artwork? When does the process begin and when does it end? These are questions of encounter, rhetorical devices for trying to articulate why art matters. The space between ends and beginnings is sometimes hard to recognise and we seem to want to seek out the edges in both art and everything else as we try to make sense of this confusing world around us. Art pushes the limits of our horizons a little further than we thought they could stretch; it complicates matters by asking questions that, at their most powerful, are rooted in temporality. What happens, though, if we actually try to answer these questions rather than leave them hanging? What would be even better, in fact, would be if an artwork could do that work for us, or at least help. I would like to propose that Katie Paterson's *Future Library* can do this job. I would like to ask you, the reader, to walk with me as I try to make my case. This argument is going to involve subjectivity, some storytelling, a helping of emotional manipulation and yet more questions.

*Future Library* is about trust. It is frightening because of this. But before we start worrying about that, some facts are important. You have this piece of paper in your hand, so this means you have already entered into *Future Library*. There is a descriptive text of the artwork elsewhere on this leaflet. It explains that this is year two of a one hundred year project. I want to claim something slightly different, to refute the facts: a century timeframe is not the time of this artwork. It is only one chapter of a much larger narrative. There are more to come, and they will unfold in a way that most likely will not follow linear chronology. Already in the first section of *Future Library* certain events have taken place. One thousand trees have been felled and one thousand more have been planted on a site at the city limits of Oslo. You are probably just about to travel to this spot, or you might have just arrived there, or you might be thinking that perhaps you will go sometime in the future.

A special, quiet room lined with the wood processed from these trees has been designed for Oslo Public Library, a building that will open in 2019. Two writers, Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell, have produced manuscripts to be stored in

this space. However until 2114 no one other than the author will read each text. Ninety-eight more writers, all yet to be known, will do the same. There is a concise brief consisting of three conditions: the authors can write what ever they wish, their text must be delivered in both a simple word-processed file with no images and a paper version, and a deadline needs to be adhered to - synchronised time, after all, is what makes systems work. Until 2114 these words will be made public only through the name of the writers. We have to trust that they have written - imagine saying yes, and then time running out. Nobody in your lifetime would know that you had just repeated the alphabet one hundred times over. Does it matter if a writer is deemed lazy when they can't hear the judgement with their own ears?

In Chapter Two, starting 2114, the texts will be collected in an anthology that will be printed on paper made from trees planted in this particular part of the forest. The land on which they grow is owned by the people of Norway – no one owns it and it cannot be purchased or sold. This fact has been written into state legislature making *Future Library* a truly public artwork. This anthology is going to be a big book – one hundred stories take up a lot of room – but nonetheless it will be portable. Books never belong to a place, they are designed for the reader and their location is in the imagination, the pages simply vehicles for language. I will not get to read these stories. Neither will Katie Paterson. The librarians who will help the first researchers find their way around the new Library in 2019 will also not read them. You will not read them. We will all be gone. These stories held in Paterson's *Future Library* are for people yet to be born. An artwork that evokes such a sense a time draws on one's own understanding of mortality, and one's thoughts of generations to come. This is unsettling; it is often preferable to avoid thinking too far into the future. The days of faith in progress are long in the past.

Questions of the time of artwork are fundamental to works of art and, because of this, they are fundamental to being human. Art is concerned with being in the world. The artist Lawrence Weiner puts it best, to my mind. He describes that artwork, specifically sculpture, is concerned with relationships in the physical, experienced world. He insists that art consists of 'the relationship of human beings to objects

and objects to objects in relation to human beings.’<sup>1</sup> This is one of those clunky sentences that warrants reading again. So, to repeat, he says that art consists of ‘the relationship of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings.’ Weiner is vehement that art is not metaphor, that it does not stand for anything else other than its own existence. *Future Library* is itself, it alludes to nothing else. Importantly it has no definitive article – it is not ‘the’ *Future Library*, nor is it ‘a’ future library. It has a name rather than a title. Such details are important. We find our place in the world through language, through history, through assumptions and through researched and received knowledge. The job of an artwork is to exceed this, to remind us that we are human, impermanent and frail. Paterson turns her attention to the imponderable phenomena of time and space, to concepts that are ever-present but impossible to capture, no matter how much we might wish to.

Space and time are constructs of measurement that provide a system to bring people, objects, places and ideas into a synchronised whole. It is invention rather than fact, enabling regulation of the vagaries of the unexpected, as well as making the predictable possible. By abiding to the system of time a consensus of conduct is created. Within this various events happen, do not happen, remain the same, or change. They form a period of sequential relations that can be named and neatly divided into past, present and future. Time of course is not in truth that simple, it operates in two quite different and interdependent ways: natural (experienced) and mechanistic (measured). An hour of measured time on Earth will be constant no matter how it is spent, but an hour of natural time differs from experience to experience: in good company an hour will be quick, whereas in bad company an hour can last an age.

Paterson’s artworks can be nothing but sculpture. They are concerned with mass, weight, gravity, form, material, scale. Traditionally, the physical object or tangible materials have been the ‘stuff of sculpture’. As literal ‘things’, objects carry the promise of durability. Sculptures in theory withstand the passage of time, they can be exhibited again, revisited, studied anew and have a life far longer than any person. Objects, however, are troublesome - they warp and deform, become lost, destroyed,

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Weiner, *Having Been Said: Writing & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner 1968–2003*, Hatje Cantz, 2004, p. 192.

forgotten or sometimes simply run out. Is the time of a sculpture the literal, physical making of the artwork – the carving, moulding, fabricating, sanding? Or is it in the rumination of ideas – the frowning, thinking, testing, sharing? Or in the germination of research – a process that winds its way into blind alleys and wrong turns? Does the time of an artwork relate to perception? I am not just thinking about those pauses when you stand in front of an artwork that rarely extend beyond minutes, but also the afterglow. Sometimes experiencing an artwork can be just like the post-concert ringing in the ears – you know it, that buzzing that continues when you are finally trying to sleep, when the sounds are still reverberating around your head.

Processes of carving, moulding, modelling, cutting are unquestionably at the root of the making of sculpture, and Paterson takes these processes into an abstract perceptual realm. Sculpture today can be fleeting, time bound, contingent, fluid and temporal while being tied to legacies of statuary, solidity, material and memorial. A concern with memory that threads its way through Paterson's artistic practice. In *The Dying Star Letters* (2012-14), for example, she writes letters reporting news of stellar deaths, each addressed to a specific person. In *All the Dead Stars* (2009) she created a map locating all the 27,000 known stars to have come to their natural ends. The passing, as it is sometime so indirectly described, of a body happens at all scales.

In 2012 Paterson made *100 Billion Suns* that has a duration so short that it could easily be missed. So far 3,216 Gamma Ray Bursts, the brightest electromagnetic events in our universe that burn with a luminosity more than a 100 billion times of our sun, have been recorded. Paterson repeated all of these explosions in just under a second using confetti cannons, a domestic, hand-held, trivial device designed to create a minor spectacle of celebration. In these few moves of the second hand on a clock she condensed vast, universal events. Gertrude Stein (1873-1941) wrote of the continuous present: a notion concerned with experience and knowledge, as well as knowledge of experience and experience of knowledge. She suggests that the world – and our knowledge of it – can only possibly exist in the present. The continuous present is a dimension where each frame of memory is layered on to the present, making every experience unique and extended into space and time.

Books and sculptures begin their independent life when they are released into the unpredictable public realm. They then become avatars that can do more than any one person, more than a single author. An avatar is a perceivable entity of abstract thought, a hybrid being that is in and of the world, an addition that embodies thought in ways yet to be scripted in language and reason. An artwork as avatar is a principle, an attitude. The artist John Latham, who like Paterson worked with scientists and demanded that art was a vital contributor to the social realm, celebrated unreasonable art. He announced:

‘A work is a work when it is unreasonable – when it is done, at the time. Later it has either changed the situation, or the situation is different, or the situation is so different, and it is of course reasonable [...] Reason relates to predictable outcomes from given premises. Don’t accept the premises and you are unreasonable!!’<sup>2</sup>

An unreasonable artwork is one yet to be fixed by history, yet to be understood, and yet to be tamed by reason and language. To be unreasonable is, for me at least, at the top of the job description for an artwork. Some applicants sell themselves well, fitting the essential and desirable qualities required for the task at hand, but when it comes to it they just don’t have what it takes. They cut corners, they look like they are doing something, but in reality they are wasting precious time and making too much noise. Others, rare ones, just get on with being unreasonable. There is no fuss, no spectacle, but they are on the button. Katie Paterson’s sculptures fit into this category. They are fit for purpose and can address directly the questions of an artwork’s time.

Two months ago I travelled to Oslo for the very first time. I arrived on a Saturday evening with nothing much to do other than wander around a new city. The next morning I was picked up to drive out to see *Future Library*. Well, that is not quite accurate. The plan was to drive to the site of the trees, a part of this first chapter. However, the route had to be rethought. My guide arrived, someone who I had never met before. She let me know that this would not be a normal journey to the forest: it was the final day of the Biathlon World Championships, a winter sport

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<sup>2</sup> John Latham, John, ‘Noit for *Control*’ in Stephen Willats (ed.), *Control Magazine*, issue 3, 1966–67. The text is illustrated with an image of a book titled *What I Believe*.

involving target shooting and cross-country skiing. It seemed that the whole city was going, tramping upwards to watch something that, as an outsider, meant nothing to me. We took the Metro instead, and the carriages were packed with people. We stepped off the train and walked first with the spectators, and then kept on going, leaving them behind to go into the forest; our boots crunching on snow and our lungs full of clean air. If you are planning your visit now as you read this, the back page has the directions. It takes around twenty minutes from the centre of the city. These are the facts and as you follow the objective instructions, your own subjective journey begins. You might live in Oslo; you might be coming from another country. There will be things going on in your life that no one else knows, and these will be brought to bear on your experience of *Future Library*.

On this March Sunday, this stranger and I talked about time, life, shared fears for the future. The time of this artwork seemed to initiate an intimate opening of thoughts between two people who had not met. A day in this person's company seemed to last only five minutes. The artwork had begun in these conversations. Making our way through the forest we soon reached a site marked with a sign pointing to *Future Library*. On arriving we sat, talked some more, listened, then retraced our steps. We returned to the city, I picked up my bags, and I went home. But my perception had changed – my perception of my own time, of the time of an artwork, and the time of time. There had been no artwork to point to, nothing to look at, nothing to measure, nothing to chart. I like my art historical facts – I like dates and weights and lengths and widths and provenances and exhibition histories. There was none of this, and there will be none of this for *Future Library*. Instead, on this one day I came across a proposal of ideas, an invitation to inhabit something to come. I am still in the time of *Future Library*. To the reader of this, welcome. You too are inside, and you will not leave it until your days end. Okay, this might sound over-arching: but humour me on this for a little while. I want to make my case.

The painter Philip Guston described in 1966 that:

‘The canvas is a court where the artist is prosecutor, defendant, jury and judge. Art without trial disappears at a glance. It is too primitive or hopeful,

or mere notions, or simply startling, or just another means to make life bearable.’<sup>3</sup>

We are not looking at a canvas when we encounter *Future Library* – in fact, it is hard to tell where the limits of this artwork are; they are yet to be drawn. This is always the case with Paterson’s work – it might ostensibly consist of a grain of sand, be a report from our solar system, a list of ideas to only exist in the imagination, yet in all cases the limits are within each individual instance of perception. As concentrated occurrences, events diametrically oppose sculpture’s pretence of longevity – as Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) taught us:

‘An experienced event is finite – at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite because it is merely a key to everything that happened before it and after it.’<sup>4</sup>

Art history as narrated in textbooks is long, but the time of artwork can also be located at a precise point on a timescale. Some artworks are so right for their times, and they burn brightly. But then they dim, and only rarely will be reignited if the compass of the future returns to their particular north. Certain times bring artworks from the past into the present that were once pregnant with possibility. Can some artworks be made before their time? Such a throwaway remark is said often, but does it hold water? What happens to the time of an artwork when it is released from the artist’s control? What happens when the artist can no longer be consulted? When does an artwork end? *Future Library* simultaneously travels on immediate and long-term time registers – well, of course this is a speculation. We cannot see what the art history of now will be.

A number of years ago I sat next to an erudite young art historian at a post-conference dinner. She pronounced that no serious thinker could write or think about contemporary art, and then she turned away and talked art history of the 1960s with someone more receptive. I disagree: art history must address future-history before it is pulled in by reason. Temporal artworks demand to be witnessed, yet it is through documentation that they resound in art history. Some art

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Guston, ‘Faith, Hope and Impossibility’, *Art News Annual XXXI* (October 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Image of Proust’ (1929, revised 1934), in *Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934*, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 238.

historians, such as the one I met over dinner, eschew the contemporary as too close, demanding more than three decades distance before an artwork is ready to study. While advantageous in seeing how an artwork stands the test of time, it leaves the researcher combing through archives, seeking out first hand testimony, checking through secondary sources and turning to the, often inaccurate, memories of the artists themselves. Art is to be experienced, to be encountered. But that is not enough: it needs to be shared in conversation; in the telling of stories an artwork expands.

*Future Library* takes one hundred years to come to its first pause from where it can begin to be fixed in language. A century into the future is beyond the life of the artist. It requires a leap of faith and trust in the future. In this future? From this present? It seems unconscionable to do such a thing. This is what is so wonderful about this artwork. It believes, it asks us to believe and to trust that all of the maps set out by the artist will be followed carefully. The process is exhilarating. The strongest artworks keep on wriggling around one's mind long after the time standing beside them. All artworks are events because they exist in time, but that time can contract and stretch in many ways. Once an event is over it becomes fiction, it becomes written into history. Before that it is resistant, it is unreasonable. What is the time of art? Can art be thought about in the present? *Future Library* is all in the present, a present that breathes into the future.