The Value of Art No One Alive Will Ever Experience

A library and a photography exhibit that won’t open for 100 years are redefining “slow art” by challenging people to think about the world beyond their own lifetimes.

Mark your grandchildren’s diaries: The year 2114 will be an eventful one for art. In May of that year in Berlin, the philosopher-artist Jonathon Keats’s “century cameras”—pinhole cameras with a 100-year-long exposure time—will be retrieved from hiding places around the city to have their results developed and exhibited. Six months after that, the Future Library in Oslo, Norway, will open its doors for the first time, presenting 100 books printed on the wood of trees planted in the distant past of 2014.
As Katie Paterson, the creator of the Future Library, puts it, “Future Library ... is an artwork for future generations.” These projects, more than a century in the making, are part of a new wave of “slow art” intended to push viewers and participants to think in time frames beyond their own lifetimes. As initiatives, they aim to challenge the prevailing short-term thinking of contemporary institutions and the brief attention spans of modern consumers, forcing people into considering works more deliberately. In a similar fashion, every April on Slow Art Day, patrons are encouraged to gaze at five artworks for 10 minutes at a time—a tough ask for the average museum visitor, who typically spends less than 30 seconds on each piece of art. But in delaying gratification from art beyond the reach of current generations, “century art” borrows from the ethos underlying the “slow art” movement and extends it even further.

In its way, too, it represents a protest against the commodification of culture—not just regarding money, but also the way in which artistic worth is measured by attention. In an era that prizes “snackable content”—items that are short and easily digestible—century art is the opposite. Some contemporary artists reacting against the idea that art should be accessible and shareable have turned to ephemerality: The popular German-British artist Tino Sehgal, for instance, makes art from fleeting interactions such as kisses and refuses to allow his “constructed situations” to be documented. Century art goes the other way, seeking solidity in the accumulation of time.
In preparation for 2114, Future Library’s editorial panel will choose one book each year for a century, starting with a manuscript from the Booker Prize-winning novelist Margaret Atwood. The unpublished, unread texts (the rules for writers state that the work can be of any length, but must be words, not pictures, and must remain entirely secret) will be stored in a specially designed room in the new Oslo City Library when it opens in 2018. The room, described as “a space of contemplation,” will be lined with the wood of a thousand-tree forest, planted especially for Future Library in the parkland just outside the city.

The work was commissioned by a Norwegian property developer, whose representatives didn’t immediately see the appeal of a project that would remain unseen until long after they were dead. It’s perhaps a question many readers and art patrons share. But for its contributors, Future Library seemed to represent a gesture of faith—in both the written word and in humanity itself. “It’s very optimistic to do a project that believes that there will be people in a hundred years [and] that those people will still be reading,” Atwood said when she accepted the commission. The second writer chosen for the project, the English novelist and Cloud Atlas writer David Mitchell, said he agreed to participate because “contributing and belonging to a narrative arc longer than your own lifespan is good for your soul.”

It’s a sentiment with some precedent. Astronauts who see the Earth from space report a profound sense of wholeness, as worldly divisions fall away and the fragility of life becomes suddenly very apparent. The philosopher Frank White coined the phrase “overview effect” to describe the experience. As he told the makers of the 2012 short film Overview: “[Astronauts] see things that we know but we don’t experience, which is that the Earth is one system, we’re all part of that system, and there is a certain unity and coherence to it.” Looking at humanity from the grand overview of generational time seems to produce a similar shift in perspective.
A related desire for intergenerational connection motivated the century cameras project. Keats, a conceptual artist who has previously copyrighted his own mind and served gourmet sunlight to plants, invited one hundred Berliners to rent steel pinhole cameras, calibrated to let in light gradually over the course of a century. In exchange for a €10 deposit (to be returned in 2114, if the currency still exists), the new photographers could plant their century cameras anywhere around the city. If the devices remain stable, the resulting photographs will provide a compressed image of the passage of time itself, with buildings knocked down after 30 years appearing as a faint white blur, while the constant rush of traffic on a busy road emerges as a permanent landmark.

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Keats, who has also initiated century camera projects in San Francisco and Phoenix, Arizona, sees the devices as a form of benign surveillance. The cameras function as an invisible spectator, prompting city-dwellers to think about the impact of their actions on future generations. Or as Keats put it, “The ways in which the decisions we make tend to most impact those who have the least power, that is to say, those who are not yet born.” Like the Future Library, the century cameras are very much an urban project, since it’s in cities that time runs fastest and the pace of life is most hectic. “Since I became an urban woman ... I’ve somehow been quite disconnected,” said Anne Beate Hovind, the Future Library project manager, who described how working on the library drew her back to the timescale she knew when she was growing up on a farm in her youth.

Works like Future Library and the century cameras raise all sorts of questions, ranging from the existential to the practical. Will any of the cameras survive? If they do, will they produce legible images? Will any of the Future Library works be any good—and does it matter if they are?
What will future generations make of century art, and will they see it as the gift that it’s intended to be? More concretely, for those of us wrestling with what the philosopher Matthew Crawford labels “a crisis of attention,” the question seems to be: How can we adopt this attitude now, in everyday life? When we struggle to look up from our smartphones, how can we look beyond the present moment and think broadly and generously across time?

With their deliberate pace, works such as Future Library and the Century Camera Project resemble another Norwegian art form known as Slow TV. These live, uninterrupted broadcasts of ordinary events have become an unlikely hit, drawing millions of viewers to watch hours of knitting, or to observe the five-and-half-day progress of a cruise ship meandering gently along Norway’s western coast. For Keats, however, there’s more to century-long projects than a leisurely pace. “It has less to do with trying to slow down in any way and more to do with being able to experience more expansively the decisions that we make,” he said.

His century cameras are a study for a larger work: a set of millennium cameras that Keats hopes to set up in cities across the world. He’s already installed two, one in Tempe, Arizona, and another in Amherst College in Massachusetts. These copper-and-gold devices will produce images of such density that it may take “tens of thousands of years” to figure out how to develop them.

Deep time, the concept of the timespan within which the Earth has existed (around 4.5 billion years), is enjoying a flood of attention in the art world at the moment. Imagining Deep Time, a recent exhibition at the National Academy of Sciences, collected works that tried to explore and express a history that goes back well before humans existed. Chief among these projects is the Long Now Foundation’s 10,000-year clock, a mechanical timepiece that will keep time for 10 millennia. The clock “models for us the creation of projects on a much larger scale than our own individual
experience,” said the show’s curator, J.D. Talasek, echoing the rationale of Paterson and Keats. “It raises questions of how you plan for, finance, manage a project that will be in place for generations.”

For all its audacity, however, the 10,000-year clock’s sense of its own importance can seem absurd, especially next to the low-cost communal efforts of Paterson and Keats. The first full-scale prototype is being backed to the tune of $42 million by Jeff Bezos, who has also donated space on his Texas ranch, and will have a chime composed by Brian Eno. Best-selling science-fiction author Neal Stephenson, who has also contributed to the Foundation, has written a novel inspired by the clock, including the notion that a quasi-religious order will have to arise to maintain it.

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Even more exclusive is another slow-art project that launched this year: the Wu-Tang Clan album *Once Upon a Time In Shaolin*. Described by its creators as “a capture of time,” the 31-track album is being sold to the highest bidder by private auction, on the condition that it can only be released to the public after 88 years. To preserve the scarcity of their creation, which they expect to sell for “millions of dollars,” Wu-Tang Clan have only made a single copy of the album, carefully destroying all other versions, both physical and digital. For the group, this uniqueness is what makes *Once Upon a Time In Shaolin* art, as well as justifying its eye-watering asking price. As Wu-Tang member RZA put it, “We’re making a single-sale collector’s item. This is like somebody having the scepter of an Egyptian king.”
For slow art to succeed, it must be able to grow as time passes. Keats’s century cameras will evolve in private, but the Future Library appears more likely to prosper, because it will develop in plain sight, as year by year new writers add their work to the collection. Just as importantly, this time capsule is public in a concrete sense, because it is embedded in the fabric of the city. Atwood and Mitchell refer to the Future Library as a hopeful project, which in an existential sense it is, but its infrastructure does more than hope: It will survive as part of Oslo’s institutional framework. Over time, the boundary between the artwork and its location will become indistinguishable—perhaps, the project suggests, the city itself is a form of slow art, created every day by its inhabitants for the benefit of future generations.

Paterson, whose previous works include a map of all the dead stars known to humanity and a live broadcast of the sounds of a melting glacier, admits that the span of the Future Library isn’t “vast in cosmic terms” like the 10,000-year clock. Yet, perhaps because it is closer—only 100 years away—the artwork feels more directly challenging. It is sufficiently awe-inspiring to remind visitors and contributors of their insignificance. But rather than simply daunting with its scale, Future Library prompts those who see it to consider their own role in its survival, not as a generic member of the human race, but as individuals with the capacity to act. “It gives hope,” said Hovind, the project manager. Hope not only in the future, but also in the possibilities of the present.

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