The Future Library and the books that won’t be read for 100 years

Artist Katie Paterson, along with authors Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell, is creating work that won’t be fully realised until a century has passed. Megan Nolan travelled to Norway to meet her

By Megan Nolan

In a forest in Norway, it is raining. After a six-hour delay, a missed connection and an unplanned layover in a northern fishing village, I have finally arrived – and boy, is it raining. People are setting up umbrellas, tucking babies under plastic sheets. Some of us have paper cups of strong black coffee to get us through, and big jagged chunks of good chocolate that were passed to us as we walked the few miles to the chosen spot. We are stumbling around the little slippy brambles and finding stumps to crouch on, small hills to peer down from. Some of us have jobs to do here: readers to corral or photographs to take. Some of us are teenagers studying locally;
some of us are legendary publishers who have travelled from London.

Many of us, though, are children – the woods teem with children in bright raincoats and boots, all taking the intermittently disastrous weather in the same good spirits as the organisers. It seems only fitting that there are so many children, given the nature of what we are here to do. I look over and see Katie Paterson beaming at them – at the eager crowd settling down for the ceremony, at what she has created. Soon, a new book by Cloud Atlas author David Mitchell will be handed over, a book hundreds of thousands of readers across the globe would be eager to read, though none of them will. Mitchell alone is familiar with the contents of his book, and he will remain its sole reader for one hundred years. Welcome to Future Library.

In 2014, a forest was planted in a clearing in these woods, a 20-minute metro journey from Oslo. On the day I arrive, we can spot some of the thousand new Norwegian spruce trees – they’re tied with small red bows, to mark them out from other shoots. In almost a century, these trees will be used to fulfil the eventual purpose of Future Library. Each year until then, an author will submit a work, unread by anyone else, to be stored in a designated room in the new public library of Oslo. In 2114, the 100 unread works will be printed for the first time using the trees: the Future Library. The first author to submit a manuscript, in 2015, was Margaret Atwood. The second, submitted earlier this summer when I visited, was David Mitchell. The project – mind-blowing, both in artistic ambition and logistic detail – was conceived by Scottish artist Katie Paterson.

Paterson was born in Glasgow and studied at the Edinburgh College of Art and at the Slade School of Fine Art, beginning a career defined by ambitious investigation of the nature of space and time. Few artists are bold enough at the beginning of their careers to approach concepts as vast as she routinely does. In many ways, the works are simple, but involve such determined engagement with cosmic concerns that they come to be unnervingly profound. A skilled artist can access universal parts of humanity by working in a very
particular, localised way – Paterson’s work does the opposite. By illuminating the far corners of our universe, she can speak to us all.

Amid the Norwegian spruce trees (Kristin von Hirsch)

Her degree show at the Slade showed a deft lightness of touch dealing with such subject matter. Entitled “Vatnajökull” (the sound of), a mobile-phone number had been written on the gallery wall in neon. Calling it, you would be connected to the Icelandic glacier which gave the piece its title; Paterson had set up a microphone, amplifier and mobile phone beneath the water of its lagoon. Altogether, 10,000 callers picked up the phone and heard the movement of the glacier’s water, the shifting of its ice. An elegant beginning to Paterson’s career, combining as it does a moment of everyday triviality (searching in one’s pocket in the dark of the gallery, fumbling to dial the number) with a connection with the great unknown.

Her work has continued to play with this gap between the prosaic and the infinite, the scientific and the humorous. Much of it has been devised with the help and facilitation of science departments in various fields – meteorology, astronomy, astrophysics – which help her to plan the logistics that make fantastical ideas into realities. One
project saw her melt and reset a meteorite before sending it back to space. In another, she worked with a lighting company to create a halogen bulb which precisely reproduces the effect of moonlight. One of my favourite works of hers is something that leaves me awed even when I listen to the brief extract available on her website, the end product of a piece called “Earth Moon Earth”. “Earth-Moon-Earth (EME) is a form of radio transmission whereby messages are sent in Morse code from Earth, reflected from the surface of the moon, and then received back on Earth. The moon reflects only part of the information back – some is absorbed in its shadows, ‘lost’ in its craters,” Paterson tells us. For this project, Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata was translated into Morse code and then sent to the moon. The version returned to Earth, altered by the craters and landscape, was then translated back into a score and recorded with its new absences included as intervals. The new version was played in a gallery on a self-playing grand piano. What a beautiful idea – how strange, how wonderful, to hear the beauty of that music refracted through space.
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Future Library was conceived of many years ago, a result of a longstanding interest in working with trees and wood. At a dinner in Oslo held to celebrate the 2016 manuscript handover, I chat with an exhausted Paterson after a long day of events, press and a public discussion with David Mitchell. She speaks eloquently of her initial thoughts, the idea of trees growing to print with, tree rings perhaps signifying chapters of the book, growing in tandem with the work. The magical thing about so much of her work is the journey between these first, seemingly implausible fancies and the process to make them live. There are so many ideas, she says, that she has in fact written a book – *Ideas* – to record them all, given that nobody could attempt to actually complete them in a lifetime.

In this case, she was commissioned to contribute to “Slow Space”, a series of public artworks for Oslo. It struck her that Norway was the ideal location for Future Library; its forests, its literary tradition, its progressive ecological approach. With the help of the city of Oslo and over the course of several years, Future Library was born. This was, remember, quite the most risky public artwork you could possibly fund – one which, by its nature, would never be seen by any of its supporters. One which could not offer anything concrete to the public in an immediate sense, but rather a promise, a shared dedication to the idea of a future. And the future – whether five or 100 years ahead – is a hard thing to grasp sometimes. When I travelled to Norway in May for this year’s manuscript handover ceremony, Anne Beate Hovind, the chairwoman of the Future Library trust, spoke movingly about the first time the key players had come together. It was shortly after the horrifying attacks carried out by Anders Breivik; the government buildings he bombed were just around the corner from the public library. Anne described their tension and distress, what it was to begin a 100-year project in the wake of forced awareness of life’s brevity.
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The atmosphere at the handover is jubilant in the insistent drizzle. David Mitchell speaks about the honour of his inclusion, particularly alongside an author of Margaret Atwood’s calibre. He is charming and eloquent and reads one of his short stories. A beautiful woman translates and reads it in Norwegian afterwards, and I’m captivated by her delivery. I’m with her every word of it, although I don’t understand. In the spirit of Future Library, meaning is being signalled and given generously and I receive it gladly, despite not knowing what it is exactly. A Philip Larkin poem, The Trees, is read and I’m not sure if it’s the lack of sleep or seeing the genuine pleasure everyone is taking in being a part of this, but I tear up at its last lines: “Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh”.

They make me suddenly aware of what I find so moving about Future Library, which is the bittersweet act of building a future you won’t get to see. There is something endlessly beautiful and endlessly painful in it. This is how societies progress; citizens live in a way that is mindful of their children. They spend their precious and limited time here on earth building the blocks of cities they will never inhabit. They sacrifice what is theirs to make better a future, one they can only trust will exist. They can’t ever know for sure. That “Afresh, afresh,
"afresh" moves me so because of the impossibility of it. All humans desire regeneration, would love to be able to say, "The old year is dead" and have it mean something true. We can't ever begin again, but the nature of the Future Library is the best thing we've got, the nearest to cheating death. We can make an act of faith, like writing a book and trusting that someone will read it in 2114. We can plant a thousand trees and believe that they will grow to their fullest height. We can, like Katie Paterson, say "I've got an idea" and hope that someone listens.

"I wish I could be in your head, just for a moment," David Mitchell says to her wistfully at one point. Seeing her eyes brighten and flash as she lists some of her discarded ideas, I can't help but wish the same thing.

“A webcam recording at the edge of the universe;" she says. “A whole beach made with the sand of hourglasses.”

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