

Creatives in profile – interview with Katie Paterson



Katie Paterson. Photo by Giorgia Polizzi.

In 2114, 1,000 trees planted a century previously in the Nordmarka forest in Norway will be cut down. From their wood, the pages of 100 texts from 100 authors will be made and published.

How can we make such predictions? Well, this is the end-goal of a generation-defying artistic project called the ***Future Library***. Conceived by Scottish artist Katie Paterson, and supported by library curator and entrepreneur **Anne Beate Hovind**, it is an idea that has captured global imaginations.

Celebrated authors Margaret Atwood, David Mitchell, and *Sjón* have already committed works to the project, with Turkish novelist Elif Shafak set to add her manuscript to the project at a handover ceremony in early June 2018.

This is a living, breathing, organic artwork that spans time, literature, ecology and human mortality.

So how does one first conceive of such a project? The *Nothing in the Rulebook* team were honoured to catch up with Paterson – widely regarded as one of the leading artists of her generation – to find out.

It is an honour to bring you this detailed interview...

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell us about yourself, where you live, and your background?

PATERSON

I've recently moved back to Scotland, I live in Fife, before that I was in Berlin for about 6 years and before that I lived in London. I studied at Edinburgh College of Art and then the Slade School of Fine Art. I graduated nearly 10 years ago, which is frightening!

INTERVIEWER

Is art your first love, or do you have another passion?

PATERSON

Advertisements



REPORT THIS ADPRIVACY

It definitely is; it was the most obvious direction I was going to go in. I knew that from a young age – I was always a daydreamer and spent time lost in other worlds. Of course, it's difficult when you're at that age to have any sort of clear vision of what the future is going to hold. I would never have predicted or been able to visualise what has happened in the years that have followed.

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell us a bit about your journey from making that decision – to pursue art – to where you ultimately are now, particularly with the Future Library project?

PATERSON

Throughout my career I've remained open to different disciplines. At art school I was wondering around and changing between sculpture and fine art and fashion – and later astronomy

and geophysics – and I couldn't settle on a discipline. It makes sense now because I still don't really settle when it comes to any disciplines.

I've always been quite resourceful when it comes to trying to make projects happen – it was quite clear to me from early on that the kind of ideas I have are complicated and they were never going to happen unless I worked really hard to make them happen – they were going to need willpower and dedication; not just from me but also from other people who would need to be invested in the projects.

INTERVIEWER

It's interesting you mention the need to rely on others and pitch them often quite complicated ideas; because, as Anne Beate says in her interview with us, when you first get approached with the idea for a project that is for 100 years in the future, it can be quite crazy. But you were quite aware of that?

PATERSON

Oh absolutely – I am so lucky that I met her! She is an absolutely remarkable woman – it takes a lot of dedication for somebody to take on one of my projects; they're not simple by any means! And especially Future Library. It's the sort of project that you throw your life into.

INTERVIEWER

With a project of such scale, how did you first conceive of the Future Library?

PATERSON

It was simple I've got to say. As these things often can be at the beginning – or at least, it *seemed* simple. I was drawing tree rings, and as I was doing that I very quickly made a visual connection between tree rings and chapters in a book and paper and trees and time. And I had a vision of a forest that was growing a book, and that the book was made of chapters of tree rings – and it would evolve and grow over time.

That all happened in a snippet of time and then, from there, it grew. I met Anne Beate and it became a stronger concept once I realised that it could happen in reality – even though in my mind it had been one of the wilder ideas that I've had.



Tree rings. Future chapters. Photo by Giorgia Polizzi.

INTERVIEWER

In terms of just the practicalities of actually making an idea like that a reality – what steps did you both have to take at that point?

PATERSON

The very first step was proposing it to BI, the producers: ‘I’ve got this idea to grow a forest over 100 years!’ Incredibly, they said yes – and then we built the idea slowly, ‘brick by brick’.

I called Anne Beate when I got back to Berlin a few days after the proposal and asked if I could come back to Norway immediately and go to a forest and stay for a while. She was quite surprised, then set it up and I stayed in her relative’s cabin deep in the woods where there was no electricity, no running water.

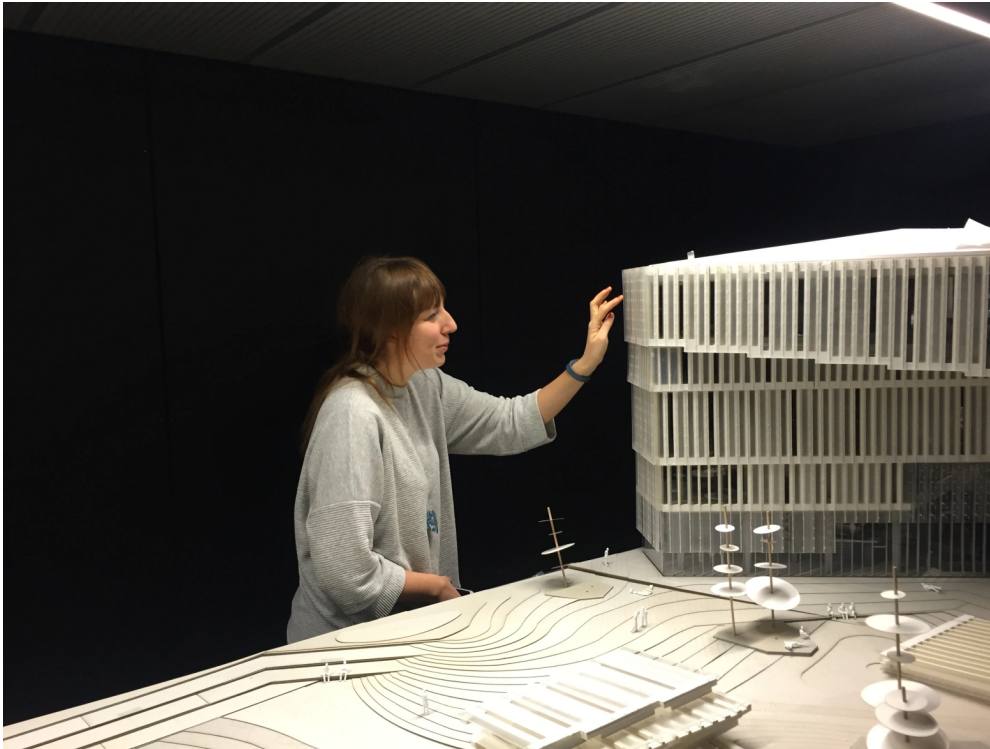
INTERVIEWER

How did it feel to get really back to basics in that way?

PATERSON

It was a remarkable experience – until then the idea for Future Library was so abstract, I felt I had to go and be in a Norwegian forest for some time to visualise it becoming a reality. There, it became a more solidified idea, imagining the authors and the time scales and how we might build in a ritual every year with the ‘handing over’ ceremonies.

From there, there were several different stages, including finding the forest. Anne Beate liaised with the City of Oslo, who donated us the land and the trees. And then there is the library aspect; we're creating a silent room inside the new Oslo public library that will open in 2020. It's going to house the manuscripts for the future, I'm designing it with the architects of the library.



Designing the silent room in the Oslo public library where the manuscripts will be stored for the next one hundred years. Photo credit: Atelier Oslo and Lund Hagem

Many aspects were in place before we started inviting the authors. We didn't approach Margaret Atwood until we felt like this was really happening.

INTERVIEWER

Until it felt more real and tangible.

PATERSON

Exactly. The trees had taken root.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have any expectations for the project at all? Did you realise it was something authors would want to get involved in, or were you sort of cautious when you first approached Margaret Atwood?

PATERSON

Oh sure we were so shocked and amazed and delighted. It was such a wonderful moment when she said yes, it was a huge seal of approval. Margaret Atwood was a remarkable writer to open the project. Even though we'd planted the forest it was at that moment when I realised 'this is it; this is something that is going to continue for the rest of our lives'.



Margaret Atwood was the first author to donate a manuscript to the Future Library. Photo by Giorgia Polizzi

From there, it just grew and grew; it's gone from a project that was quite theoretical to a living artwork that is really taking form. We're now on year four – the handover with Elif Shafak is next week (2 June) and we're working with next year's author too. Future Library is a major part of our lives; it's intertwined with daily life, and the ritual that repeats each year is a defining moment.

INTERVIEWER

There's something striking about the rituals built into the project and how they are set to carry on for a hundred years. We live in this age where everything is so focused on the present and the here and now, that we have lost track of ideas that span across generations. Was the idea of longer term, 'cathedral' thinking specific in your mind when you first came up with the idea? Or is it something that solidified more as the project progressed?

PATERSON

It wasn't specific at the beginning; the initial idea appeared in a flash, the repercussions of the idea were unclear. Future Library is evolving into something far more complex than I could have

imagined.

The 'cathedral thinking' you mention is really interesting. I continue to be inspired by a place I've visited called Ise Jinju in Japan, a Shinto shrine near Kyoto. Here shrines have been built and rebuilt in exactly the same form every 20 years, for a few thousand years. And the community have been growing the wood for the shrines in a special forest, over this vast expanse of time.

I love the idea that you need to plan hundreds of years ahead for something to last or exist; it seems the antithesis of the current mode. Instead we live in a 'one click' world.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it feels there's a certain 'unreal' element to our lives in that respect? As you say we spend all this time clicking on social media; but not actually participating in our social lives. It definitely seems to stand in contrast to those things that are real – a forest and nature, but also an actual physical printed book.

PATERSON

Exactly. Of course, I'm absolutely part of this technologically driven culture, too. Though when I am inside the forest there are moments when I am acutely aware of the timelessness nature of trees. It could be any era on earth there, just about! You could be standing thousands of years in the past in the same forest or you could be standing there thousands of years into the future and it could almost be the same place.

I love that feeling to be sort of outside of time or inside of time – to be somewhere, where time is drawn out, and to not have this 'instant-ness' feeling that seems to be there in many other aspects of life.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel that sensation of time slowing down – especially during the handover ceremonies or when you're in the forest – affects you at all? Is there a spirituality to it?

PATERSON

Last year, we had a golden harp brought in for the ceremony and the musicians were warming up with us there early in the morning – there was such quietude, a serene moment that's hard to define, when everybody was gearing up amongst the trees – time slows down and it's just precious. Then the authors arrive and walk in the footsteps of the previous authors and those of the

future and it's all part of this rite we've created that will continue for the next 96 years. Elif Shafak uses the term 'secular acts of faith' and I believe Future Library is one of these acts.



A golden harp for the 2017 handover ceremony. Photo by Kristin von Hirsch

INTERVIEWER

The relationship with nature is clearly so bound up with the project – do you think that the project speaks to people partly because we live in an age where we are also suffering the effects of environmental break down?

PATERSON

I think so. The planet is being destroyed and it's affecting all of our lives. In that sense nature feels really close – you can't help but think how even the rain falling on our heads is connected to the changing climate and the way the planet is trying to survive.

I think appreciating our natural environment is something Norway does exceptionally well. Our forest is a tiny patch inside the larger forest that surrounds the whole city of Oslo, which is protected under law so developers aren't allowed to encroach on it. Oslo's citizens deeply appreciate the forest too, and I think in a way this cultural link with the forest is why the city have been so supportive of Future Library.

INTERVIEWER

It seems really appropriate in that sense how links up the timeless nature of writing – you think of Shakespeare, Shelly, Austen, Joyce – and how writing and literature can stretch across centuries; just as trees and forests do, too. How do you think authors today can write for the readers of tomorrow?

PATERSON

A book is an object that survives time and passes voices through time.

It's so easy to forget that books come from trees! I am an e-reader and use technology all the time; but how can we improve on the printed book? It's not possible! Who knows what the methods of reading will be like in a hundred years' time. The form of reading may be something that's so far beyond our imagination right now.

If you jump back a century – that generation would never have guessed the authors that are writing now – it's unimaginable – it's too long a gap to perceive of. I find it odd that the authors right now will be authors from the past, many will be dead. And then the authors at the end of this project will still be alive and be read by their contemporaries.

INTERVIEWER

There's a certain sense of mortality tied up in the project. Do you think about that or dwell on that at all?

PATERSON

I do; and it can be disconcerting. Of course, I did conceive this project so that it would be going on beyond my lifetime so I was always aware that I wasn't going to be around to see it through –

it's about getting everything set up to ensure it keeps going after we're gone.

The question of mortality is there – even the legalities of artist's contracts have to contain clauses relating to death. I had a child this year and so he'll be coming with me to the handover ceremony. He won't quite be one year old at that point; I've thought how I deeply hope he will be around to read these books.

INTERVIEWER

Thinking about the future, do you have an idea or ideal in your head about what the final ceremony will be like. Or are you very prepared to let it go?

PATERSON

My greatest hope is that it's still there at that point and that there is a ceremony and that the world hasn't collapsed in on itself! It's an emotional thought, the final ceremony, and the idea of those vast trees we know so well, being cut.

We're always troubleshooting with Future Library and thinking what could happen that we need to prepare for – but it's the unpredictable things that worry me. But ultimately you have to have trust and hope and I think those are key concepts within the project.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever think about the authors and what they're actually writing and the stories they are going to produce – is there anything you are hoping for?

PATERSON

We leave it entirely up to the authors, it's important that they have free reign to write whatever they chose. The only rule we have is that there are no illustrations – just the written word. I like to imagine what is hidden within their manuscripts, but it's more satisfying to not know because in some ways that's the key to it all – that none of us know and it's going to be a complete surprise to those in the future.

Each author brings a completely different perspective to the project, and that's important, it doesn't concern one set theme – it's about bringing people together.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel there's a certain sense that each author brings something different but complementary to the project, in that case?

PATERSON

Yes, I think there is a thread that connects all the authors together. There is this almost familial bond that we create with them. Like a family tree, and each author follows in the footsteps of the one before and through the annual ceremony we do create a chain of people who are connected through time and through the trees.



A path through the Nordmarka forest – where the footsteps of authors past, present and future will follow. Photo by Kristin von Hirsch

INTERVIEWER

Isn't that the truth of so many artists and writers in general; we're all in conversation with one another.

PATERSON

Absolutely. And here they are each having a conversation with the authors that have come before; but also those who are still to come.

INTERVIEWER

And what's still to come from you – could you tell us a little about some of the future projects you're working on?

PATERSON

I'm actually working on a book myself at the moment – called 'A place that exists only in moonlight'. It's a collection of over 100 short texts that are similar to haiku; they are ideas for artworks to exist in the imagination. I have a lot of ideas for artworks but not all of them turn into real forests! So I've been writing them as text works, they come alive in the reader's minds.

INTERVIEWER

There's a certain lightness there it sounds like to be able to note down these ideas without necessarily having to worry about putting them into reality. And it's interesting to consider what you mentioned earlier about not ever committing to an artistic discipline and possibly pigeon holing yourself into that. Do you think that creativity is something that can be defined or is it something we can pursue in many different ways?

PATERSON

I'm so open when it comes to creativity – that's what creativity is; it's about being as open and curious as you possibly can be. For me creativity flourishes most when I don't pay attention to boundaries or limits. It doesn't matter whether an idea exists as something real or not – it's about letting the imagination go as far as it possibly can – even to the point of absurdity.

INTERVIEWER

If you had one piece of advice for people – artists and writers – what would it be?

PATERSON

The imagination needs tending to. Take good care of it.



Tending trees as you must tend to your imagination. Photo
by Kristin von Hirsch