

An Artist Is Growing a Forest That'll Become a Library of Books in 100 Years

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by Nell Frizzell



The site of artist Katie Paterson's Future Library in Norway. Photo by Vibeke Hermanrud.

If a book is just pulp, then a library is just a forest.

Scottish artist **Katie Paterson** (<http://www.katiepaterson.org/>) has uprooted this idea and made it a reality. She's planted a ***Future Library*** (<http://www.katiepaterson.org/futurelibrary/>) of 1,000 trees in a forest on the outskirts of Oslo, Norway. There, she'll invite a different writer, every year for the next century, to write a manuscript, held in trust, unread and unopened until 2114. Then, bringing together those unread words and un-pulped potential, the trees will be harvested and turned into a special anthology of books. The first of which is being written now, by speculative fiction author Margaret Atwood.

This is far from the first time Paterson has stretched an artistic idea over a seemingly impossible scale or measure of time. Her project *Campo del Cielo*, *Field of the Sky* took a meteorite, melted it down, recast it and then fired it back off into space. For *Langjökull*, *Snæfellsjökull*, *Solheimajökull* she created three records out of glacial ice and played them until they completely melted. For *Inside this desert lies the tiniest grain of sand* she buried a nano-sized grain of sand deep in the Sahara desert.

So what brought her down to this mulchy, pine-needled earth? And how many of those trees did she actually plant herself? I spoke to the artist from her Berlin studio to find out.

VICE: Hi Katie. I've heard that the idea for *Future Library* came to you on a train. What happened?

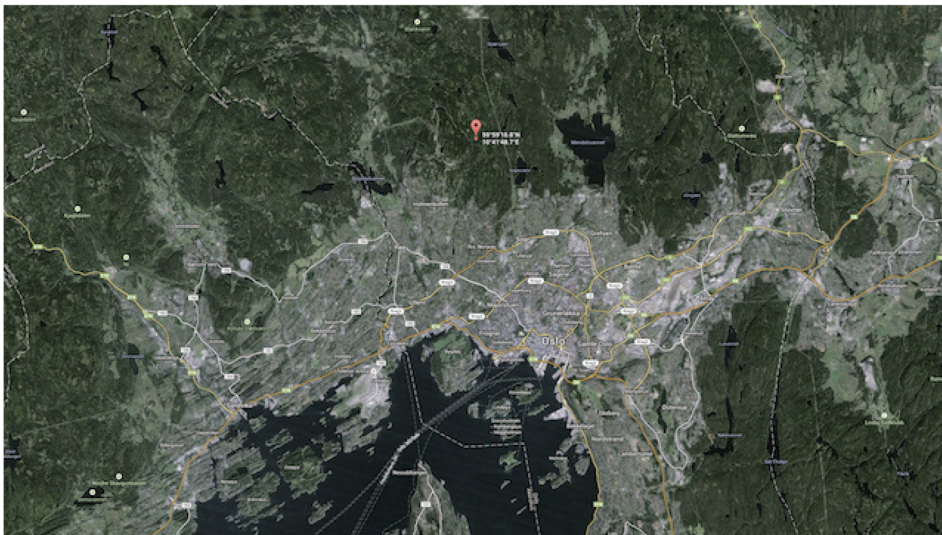
Katie Pearson: I always do a lot of scribbling on the train. I was drawing the rings of a tree. Suddenly, in that moment, I made the connection about trees becoming pulp becoming paper and then books. I thought about chapters; about how trees and books grow in stages. And then I started imagining this future forest.

So this whole concept actually came from a visual shape? A doodle?

Exactly. I scribble, I use word association, I write and connect things both visually and in language. I've got hundreds of notebooks.

Time features very heavily in your work, from the ice-melt records to the [timepieces project](http://katiepaterson.org/timepieces/) (<http://katiepaterson.org/timepieces/>). Where does that come from?

I can't get away from it. Sometimes time is embedded in the material, like the meteorite—that was billions of years old. Or the [Fossil Necklace](http://katiepaterson.org/fossil/) (<http://katiepaterson.org/fossil/>); some of those pieces were over three and a half billion years old and looked like little planets. This project has a shorter duration, relatively: just 100 years. Some of the theories they're exploring in physics are quite conceptual; like whether time even really exists.



Future Library forest map. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Do you have a scientific background?

God no, not at all. It's a miracle that any of this has even happened. I don't think I even passed Standard Grade at school. I don't have a scientific mind. I'm just really drawn to the expansive, visual, and abstract elements of it.

With these projects, it's like you're trying to wrestle these very problematic ideas—like time—into something tangible. Is planting trees almost a coping mechanism?

The thought of growing a tree gave me that 100-year space. It's an expanse into the future, but not so far ahead as to become incomprehensible. At the end of the day it's just wood. It's wood and paper, books and trees. It sits on top of some of the simplest things in existence. And hopefully these things will still exist in the next 100 years.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood describes the future as "sheer vertigo." But she also wrote that "When any civilization is dust and ashes, art is all that's left over." Are you pessimistic about the future? Or does art give you hope?

The room I'm designing for the Oslo Library that will hold the manuscripts will be on the fifth floor, among the special collections and archives. So they will be kept safe, even if the fjords pour into the land. Which could happen. Margaret even said that, in 100 years, Norway may not even exist as a country. Perhaps these futures that are being written now will come true in 100 years. I don't know who'll read them. Maybe they'll be like the characters in Margaret's books.



Margaret Atwood, left, and Katie Paterson, right. Photo by Giorgia Polizzi.

How many of the saplings did you actually plant yourself, with your own hands?

About 50, I'd say. There was a group of 10 of us, and then the foresters, who can just plant at the speed of light. We took the self-seeding little spruces from elsewhere in the forest and transplanted them to this space. We put a little dab of wax to stop them getting eaten by insects, but it also means that we'll be able to identify our trees as they grow. We went back quite recently and they'd started budding.

Do Norwegians still really believe in wood sprites and trolls?

Yes. And, I have to admit, I lived in Iceland for a while and did start to believe in fairies. Well, actually, I got lost in a rock forest—it looked like a forest made of rocks—and I suddenly realized why all these myths and sagas have come out of Scandinavia. These places do feel eerily magical; you can completely believe that there are other imaginary creatures around you.



A Future Library sapling (Photo by MJC)

You've said that this artwork takes place in the imagination of the visitor. Roland Barthes argued that a book only exists in the mind of the reader. Are you turning visitors to the forest into readers before the books even exist?

Yes. Although, I didn't make that connection when I first had the for *Future Library*. I mean, it is real. The trees are growing, the writers are writing, but most of where the work exists, other than in the forest, is in people's minds. They'll be able to read the title of the author's piece, but other than that everything is intangible and won't take form for another 100 years.

What kind of books are you going to commission?

We're going to commission them year on year, so we're not stuck on a particular kind of author or anything. We've been looking at Norwegian children's authors, poets, even astronomers. It can be fiction or non-fiction, one word or as long as the writer likes, in any language. It's as open as possible for the authors. Our only restriction is that it has to be just the written word – no illustrations – and they have a year to write it.



(Photo by Giorgia Polizzi)

From melting glaciers to desertification, your work takes a conceptual look at ecological issues. Is raising environmental awareness important to you, as an artist?

Of course it's ecological – in the sense that everything links up and is related. But, for me, the main reason is the act of imagination. That's the root.

Thanks, Katie.