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Katie Paterson Takes the Very Long View

by Scott Indrisek



Katie Paterson working on "Future Library."
(© Giorgia Polizzi)

Scottish artist Katie Paterson, currently based in Berlin, recently initiated a project in Norway that won't be finished for 100 years. Titled "Future Library," the basic thrust of the work involves 1,000 Norwegian spruce trees planted in Nordmarka forest, a reasonably short commute via train from Oslo. Those trees will provide the raw material to print an anthology

of literary works, with one title being commissioned each year from now through 2114.

Paterson is creating a room within Deichmanske Library in Bjørvika, what she terms a "public portal" that will hold the finished volumes when they are produced a century from now. The commissioned works will not have been previously printed or seen by the public, and will remain unread until the conclusion of the project — in other words, when everyone currently involved with "Future Library" is long dead.

The project was commissioned by development company Bjørvika Utvikling and is part of "Slow Space," a series of public art commissions produced by the UK's Situations. Paterson herself will helm a selection committee to commission the annual books, joined by auxiliary members who will rotate every four years or so. "The authors are being selected for their outstanding contributions to literature and poetry and for their work's ability to capture the imagination of this and future generations," she explained. "Two key words in our selection process are imagination and time. We are aiming for 100 contributions from writers of any age, nationality, of any content, of mixed genres and styles, and in any language. The length of the piece is entirely for the author to decide. The title and their name will be displayed in the library room, but nothing beyond that."

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

This is not the first time that Paterson has engaged the physical world as raw material or as an active collaborator in her practice. Previous projects have involved simple directives — like “a fragment of the moon couriered around the world for a year,” or “a meteorite, cast, melted, and re-cast back into a new version of itself” — and as such highlight the contrast between our comparatively transient lives and the uncharted immensity of the larger universe. “Future Library,” Paterson said, “connects with my wider practice through its engagement with nature and time — long, slow time. While previous works have dealt with time on a geological or cosmic scale of millions of years, the human timescale of 100 years is more confronting. It’s beyond our current lifespans, but close enough to come face-to-face with it.”

Interacting with the project doesn’t require a journey to Norway. Paterson has produced 1,000 works on paper that “entitle the owner to one complete set of the texts printed on the paper made from the trees after they are fully grown and cut down in 2114.” The artwork-cum-legal document will be on view in New York at James Cohan Gallery’s “The Fifth Season” group show, opening June 24, and at Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh from June 27. Consider it a sound investment in the future.