

CULTURE

The Future Library: An untold anthology growing in Oslo

By Billie Miro Breskin
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Rio Gandara/Helsingin Sanomat.

The 100-year durational artwork celebrates a decade this year

This weekend, in Oslo's Nordmarka wilderness, something of a pilgrimage will take place. Amongst the lush woodlands that surround the Norwegian capital, a special glade of one thousand trees, the Future Library Forest, will reach the 10th year of its growth. A decade ago, the trees of this forest were planted and, 90 years from now, they will be cut down. For each year of this century span, an author writes a manuscript. Kept safe in a chamber within Deichman Bjørvika, Oslo's main library, nobody will read the texts until 2114, when they will be printed on paper made from the trees of the Future Library Forest.

This ambitious project is the concept of Scottish artist Katie Paterson, whose oeuvre often engages with the intersections of art and science, past and future. Each year, a small group called the Future Library Trust (which includes Paterson) selects an author to participate by writing a manuscript of any length, in any genre. The only condition is that only the author may read it. The first author in the series was Margaret Atwood. Since then, writers like Karl Ove Knausgård and Ocean Vuong have been selected, handing over their concealed manuscripts in the Future Library Forest. That handover ceremony is what will bring hundreds of curious visitors to the woods for their pilgrimage on the morning of May 26th.



The Future Library handover ceremony in 2018. Photo: Bjørvika Utvikling by Kristin von Hirsch

This year, the chosen author is Valeria Luiselli. Born in Mexico City and raised between South Korea, South Africa, and India, the author (who is also a professor at Harvard University and Bard College in the United States) has built a career writing both fiction and nonfiction. Often centering themes of identity, language, and migration in her work, Luiselli writes in Spanish and English. Of course, it is only in 2114 that readers will discover what genres, themes, or languages Luiselli chose to work with for this text. Equally important, is the fact that the vast majority of people who attend this year's decennial handover - or who read this article - will never get to read any of the works written for the project.

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Katie Paterson, the Scottish artist who conceived the Future Library project

This inevitable denial is precisely what helped inspire the Future Library; it prompts questions over whether, in a hundred years time, there will still be forests, readers, or libraries. Despite a wretched prognosis for the future of our environment and an ever-growing devaluation of the arts, Paterson chooses to believe that there will be. Speaking on these themes to Visit Norway, Paterson stated, "Future Library is not a directly environmental statement but involves ecology, the interconnectedness of things - those living now and still to come. It questions the present tendency to think in short bursts of time, making decisions only for us living now." The Future Library is therefore a gift to future generations, simultaneously promising hope and serving as a memento mori.

Visitors to Deichman Bjørvika can ponder these ideas in the Silent Room, the chamber in which all completed manuscripts are kept (under lock and key, of course). Carved from the wood of trees felled to create space for the Future Library Forest, the Silent Room sits on the top floor of the library. Merete Lie, the head of Deichman Library describes the small room as "organic, an oasis in the busy library where one can sit and ponder the small and big things in life." With curving wooden walls and shallow benches, the Silent Room is cocoon-like, dotted with small glass compartments that bear the texts.



The Silent Room at the Deichman Bjørvika library. Photo: Einar Aslaksen



Inside the Silent Room. Photo: Einar Aslaksen

While Paterson may not be Norwegian, the ethos of the project certainly is. Anne Beate Hovind, the Chair of the Future Library Trust reflected on this connection, saying that the project “resonates across borders, religion, language and ethnicity.” She goes on, “It’s very Norwegian in that it deals with forests, nature, the earth. It’s unpretentious, it’s real. The core of the work is about long term thinking, hope, trust and rituals. That the artwork outlasts our lifetimes makes it unique. It shows us a way to those who are not even yet born, giving voice to their futures.” Oslo has certainly welcomed the project, and the city government has agreed to protect the forest and manuscripts. At last year’s handover ceremony, [Mette-Marit, Crown Princess of Norway](#), attended, her attention representative of her country’s growing love of the Future Library.

In a time when pessimism and spiralling news dominate our focus, there is something pure - despite its complexity - in the Future Library project. What’s to come may be more than uncertain, but there are some things we know to be true. As you are reminded each time you visit the [Future Library website](#) (itself an invitation to slow down), “A forest is growing in Norway. In 100 years it will become an anthology of books.” For now, that is all we need to know.

*The 2024 Future Library handover ceremony will take place in Oslo on May 26th. **Everyone is welcome to attend.** Participants will meet at “[Sporten](#)” at Frognersteteren at 9:45 before being guided to the Future Library forest at 10:00. The ceremony will begin at 10:45, and take approximately an hour. For more information and to livestream the ceremony, visit the [Future Library Instagram](#).*

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