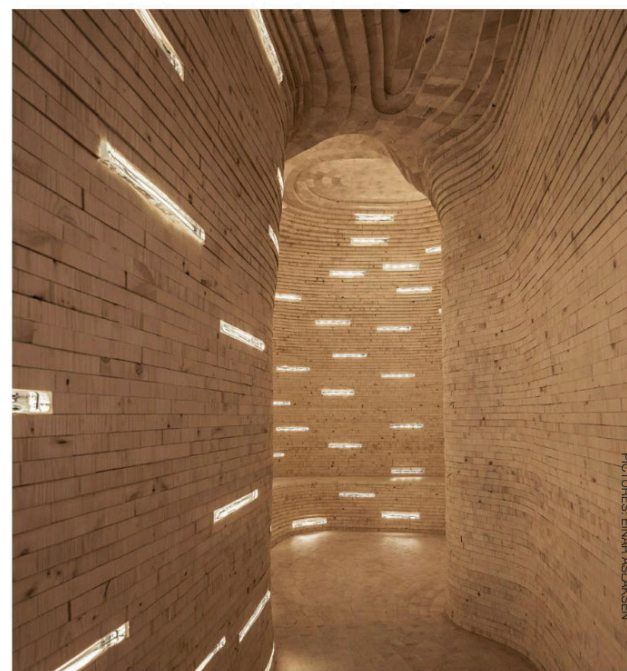
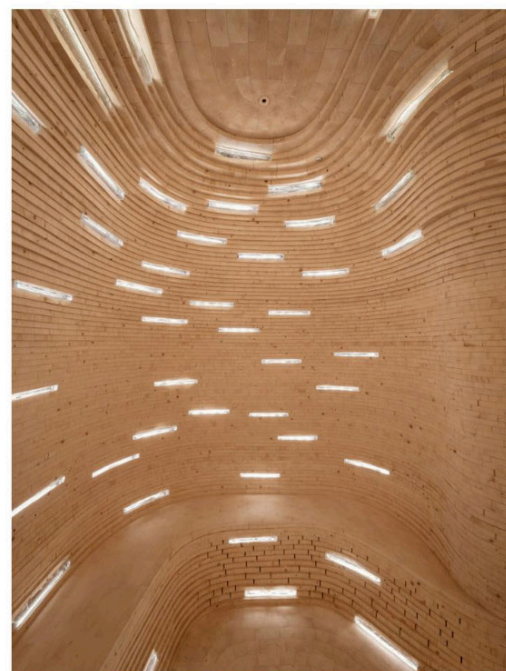




# Apocalypse now?



FUTURE LIBRARY

FUTURE LIBRARY

Katie Paterson's art approaches big topics on a grand scale, making hard-to-fathom concepts tangible. Celebrating its tenth anniversary, her astonishing Future Library project is aimed at generations to come. But Paterson confesses to Greg Thomas that it's not easy to be hopeful about what lies in wait for our children and the planet

**K**atie Paterson's Future Library is a dazzling conceit. One new text is written each year for a century, all of which are due to be published in 2114 using paper from a specially grown spruce forest in Norway that was planted in 2014. Each summer, a different author is commissioned to create a piece that expands the library. Crucially, their words remain unread until 2114. This year's author announcement will be made at Edinburgh International Book Festival, which has adopted the 'Future Library' tag for a whole strand of its activities, including workshops on forestry and a video-streamed talk from Margaret Atwood (the first Future Library author) on the theme of practical utopias.

'When I started Future Library, I was often asked about the future of books,' Paterson tells me over a Zoom connection from her home in Fife. 'There were all those discussions about e-readers, remember? And how we might read in future. But now the questions I find myself being confronted with are: will the human race survive until 2114? Will the forest survive? I don't think anyone could have predicted the decade that has come. We've had the pandemic, we've got wars raging around the world, and the climate crisis has just deepened and deepened.'

Paterson's work allows us to frame questions about the future existence of humanity, reflecting not only the peculiarly intense anxieties of our age, but the grand scope and scale of her practice. Responding to themes such as geological time and the dimensions of deep space, Paterson has consistently found ingenious ways of making more-than-human scales of existence tangible and engaging to audiences. A breakthrough work in 2007, 'Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected From The Surface Of The Moon)' used an automated piano to beam Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' to the moon and back. Subsequently, the artist has created a map of all the dead stars in the sky ('All The Dead Stars'), a scented candle whose aromas correspond to a journey through the solar system ('Candle: From Earth Into A Black Hole'), and a record player that turns at the planet's speed ('As The World Turns').

In recent years, however, the Edinburgh and Slade-trained artist has found her attention inexorably drawn to the environmental and political crises engulfing our planet. As she put it in a 2022 interview 'the older I get . . . the world that we're creating: I can't look away. Clearly, artists don't live in a vacuum. We've always responded to the contemporary moment and ours is just so unbelievably potent.' The most remarkable recent expression of this shift in her focus was the 2022 exhibition *Requiem*, at Edinburgh's Ingleby Gallery. This consisted of 364 vials of geological deposits spanning the entire history of Earth (starting in the pre-solar era, over 4.6 billion years ago) to be poured into a large, hand-blown glass urn by visitors to the exhibition over the course of its run.

The post-1945 specimens included in *Requiem* formed a staggering, sobering index of the scale of damage done to Earth over a microscopic fragment of time. There was radioactive coconut shell from Bikini Atoll, coral from heat-bleached reefs, microplastic found in the Mariana Trench, rock from a nuclear-waste dumping site, and more. Geological time is collapsing before our eyes; or rather, under our influence. As an artist concerned with relationships of scale between human and non-human temporalities, is it scary to see these two axes of measurement collapsing in on each other? 'It's terrifying,' Paterson confirms. 'Future Library is a project for unborn generations. My son *might* read these works. But what kind of future will he or his kids be living through? Sometimes it's difficult to be hopeful.'

>>





Future librarians (from top left, clockwise), Han Kang, Margaret Atwood, David Mitchell, Karl Ove Knausgård with Katie Paterson (far left), during the 2022 ceremony

>>

We return to hope later in our chat, via the more humdrum matter of book festivals, and the eminent suitability of Paterson's work in literary settings. Her projects have, after all, always tended to proceed from starting points in language. Emerging from the conceptual tradition, many of Paterson's pieces are essentially relatable in single sentences, because that is the format in which they began.

In 2019, she published *A Place That Exists Only In Moonlight*, a book of her more impractically cosmic ideas: 'Objects coated in gold/ extracted from/ shooting stars'; 'A fountain drawing water/ from each ocean's/ deepest point.'

Future Library is Paterson's most obviously literature-adjacent work, with past contributors including some of the world's best-known writers: David Mitchell (2016), Elif Shafak (2017), Han Kang (2019), Ocean Vuong (2020), and Karl Ove Knausgård (2022). Their brief is a strange one but some of them have called it liberating. Until publication day (by which point none of them will be alive), the writers' work will be read by literally no one, stored in manuscript form in a specially designed room in Oslo Public Library.

'There's no magic circle,' Paterson tells me, after I probe her for details on how secret 'secret' actually means in this context. 'The authors are under oath; they have a legal obligation not to tell me or anyone what they're writing. I'm always terrified when we come together for the presentation ceremony,' she continues, laughing. 'I just want to stay away from the manuscripts.'

These ceremonies, marking the handover of a completed manuscript, take place during the early summer each year, in the plantation where the trees for the library are being grown. When we speak, Paterson has just returned from this year's event, where Mexican author Valeria Luiselli

collaborated with sound artist Leo Heiblum, who projected whale song, bird calls and thunderstorms onto the enveloping canopy around the ten-year-old spruce plantation. 'It was really beautiful,' Paterson says. 'And at times quite apocalyptic.'

That increasingly seems the right word for those questions Paterson's work is asking us. So, does she feel a responsibility to bring a measure of hope to audiences, or to provide tangible solutions to the climate and nature emergencies that could ultimately see our species wiped out? 'The intention in a lot of my work is to widen our horizons, to provide a deep-time perspective that may be helpful as we try to change our ways. But it's hard to feel that, as an artist, you're going to be the one making the great changes. We are amongst a huge number of people trying to place our feet forwards and imagine different futures.'

Still, to engage with Paterson's work is not only to grapple with despair but to learn of the myriad ways in which we could yet save ourselves and the planet. She has recently returned from Iceland full of excitement at discussions with scientists about new methods for re-greening the oceans (so cutting-edge they are still confidential).

Paterson also spent time on the Thórsmörk mountain ridge, the kind of environment which, she says, allows her to put a number of concerns in a wider perspective. 'Within these vast landscapes, it's possible to return to a sort of eternal time, reminded of just how ancient the earth is, and all the different seasons it's been through. That picks me up again, being reminded of the more-than-human world . . . life will endure, in some form. It gives me hope.'

**Future Library At 10, Edinburgh Futures Institute, 12 August, 6.30pm.**

EDINBURGH  
**FESTIVAL**  
*Guide* 2024

+

THE OUTFRAN  
CRYSTAL PITE  
MIRIAM MARGOLYES  
GRANT MORRISON  
COMALA, COMALA  
CHARLOTTE MCLEAN  
PREM SAHIB  
KIMBERLEY TESSA  
DECLAN MCKENNA  
SOPHIE FIENNES  
KEITH BRYMER JONES  
JOSH THOMAS  
FUTURE LIBRARY

ART

BOOKS

FILM

FRINGE

INTERNATIONAL

JAZZ

CITY GUIDE

GINGER JOHNSON

PUTTING THE FRINGE ON RED ALERT

THE LIST

FREE